THEO of GOLDEN

a novel

ALLEN LEVI

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 47
CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50
CHAPTER 51
CHAPTER 52
CHAPTER 53
CHAPTER 54

CHAPTER 55
CHAPTER 56
CHAPTER 57
CHAPTER 58
CHAPTER 59
CHAPTER 60
CHAPTER 61
CHAPTER 62
EPILOGUE
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theo of Golden

Copyright © 2023 by Allen Levi

First Edition — 2023 All rights reserved.
www.allenlevi.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information browsing, storage, or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the publisher. For permission requests, contact Allen Levi at info@allenlevi.com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Back cover image by Garry Pound
In collaboration with MOB Consortium/TTK

ISBN (Hardcover) 979-8-9887029-1-7
ISBN (Paperback) 979-8-9887029-0-0
ISBN (eBook) 979-8-9887029-2-4

Published by
Allen Levi
P.O. Box 642
Hamilton, Georgia 31811
info@allenlevi.com
1. Fiction, Literary

To Cubby Culbertson,
as a token of gratitude for our long friendship
and a reminder, just between us, that you
promised to buy a hundred copies of the book
if I dedicated it to you.
Will that be cash or charge?

THEO of GOLDEN

“Ellen’s wilted halo.
Christmas shoes of Lamisha W.
Pill bottle of Bobbo.
Found feather of the absent jay.
October sky above the Oxbow.
Oceanscape at Biscopo.
The blues of Golden were plentiful that year.”

From a brochure announcing
an art exhibit at Zila Gallery

PROLOGUE

Theo was in Golden for only a year, from springtime to springtime. He arrived just before Easter, when the Boughery and the Promenade were an ocean of dogwood blooms and azaleas. When pollen settled like a lemon patina on every exposed surface in the city.

Over time, his friends would learn that he had a great fondness for rivers. Be it the Douro of his childhood, the Seine of his glory days, the Hudson of his retirement, or the half dozen others that flowed through his various hometowns, he had a riparian instinct that seemed to draw him toward moving water. Growing up in a maritime nation might have had something to do with it. Perhaps every son of Portugal has the sojourning spirit of Magellan in his blood.

Whatever the reason, it is not surprising that he chose to live beside the Oxbow when he was in Golden. From his back window, facing west, he could see it at any hour of the day. From just outside his back door, three stories up, he could hear it. Or so he said. At every place or any hour, with his eyes closed, he could feel it, could sense its determined pursuit of the gulf, its winding journey south, its glad march to the Atlantic.

Only a year. Not so long. But long enough to create a current of his own and to catch others in it. Without knowing it, a whole cadre — Asher, Tony, Ellen, Basil, dozens of others — was being carried along by the vortex that was Theo.

Floating.

Sailing.

Gathering mass and momentum.

Running to an ocean they knew little about at the time.

And looking back, all would have said — in praise of that old Portuguese man with the lilt in his voice and the hint of a smile constantly on his lips — ”our hearts,” to use the preacher’s words, “our hearts burned within us.”

CHAPTER 1

On his first full day in Golden, Theo woke early, pulled back the curtains of his hotel room, and looked out over the southern dawn. He had arrived the previous afternoon from his home in New York City, where winter, with a newsworthy late-season mixture of snow and ice, was in full fury. The flight to Atlanta (on a private jet) and the drive farther south to Golden (in a chauffeur-driven Lincoln Town Car) had transported him to a world of warmth, abloom in myriad shades of green, yellow, lavender, and pink.

Now, waking from a night of restful sleep, he stood inches from the window and breathed deeply, as if he might somehow inhale the freshness of morning through the panes of glass. He gazed admiringly at the first touches of springtime.

His eyes moved westward to the broad, meandering flow of the Oxbow River. A ribbon of fog hovered over the water.

From three stories up and through the dim light before sunrise, Theo recognized many of the landmarks he had studied in preparation for his trip: the cobblestone streets, the Iron Works, the old cotton warehouses, the antebellum oaks.

But three stories up was not nearly close enough for someone of his inquisitive disposition. He dressed comfortably, inspected himself in the mirror, straightened his collar and scarf, and turned off the lights. He hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door handle and took the stairs to the hotel lobby. He tipped his hat to the desk clerk and stepped out into the cool morning, eager to walk the streets before they became busy with foot traffic and automobiles.

Other than a coffee shop and a small diner, the businesses along Broadway were closed. Theo had the sidewalk almost entirely to himself as he began his walk.

He had no particular destination or goal in mind. Whenever he saw an object or sight that interested him — and he was a man very easily interested — he paused and lingered until his curiosity was satisfied.

He was, for instance, interested in the ornamental iron work on the

facade of the corner building. Who made it? When? How?

He was interested in the composition of the bricks in the old but well-preserved building that now housed a college admissions office.

He was interested in the plaque that told the story of the median, called the Promenade, that ran down the middle of Broadway. (Wherever he lived or traveled, Theo made a habit of reading historic markers, something he was able to do proficiently in five languages.)

He was interested in a sculpture, of modern vintage, near the entrance of the university nursing school.

He took particular interest in a small bird that perched and begged for crumbs from a bench along the sidewalk.

Theo stopped, bent slightly at the waist with his hands clasped behind him, and whispered to the imploring creature. "I'm sorry, dear fellow, but I have nothing to give you this morning. Perhaps tomorrow? And stop complaining. Be glad you're not in New York today."

He picked up an empty beer bottle and put it in a nearby trash can.

At one point, he took out a small magnifying glass, a loupe, from his pocket to study a purplish azalea bloom.

And on and on.

Those punctuations of interest turned Theo's walk into a crawl. By the time he had gone a mere two blocks, morning traffic was steady, the sidewalks were beginning to buzz with students and businesspeople, and the parking spaces on both sides of the Promenade, which had been vacant earlier, were almost full.

But not to worry.

On this day, and for the foreseeable future, Theo had no deadlines, no meetings, and no obligations. He was at liberty to enjoy the carefreeness of unfettered flexibility and complete anonymity. He was a mere tourist.

He did not know a soul in the town.

Well . . . perhaps one.

He was not yet certain how long he would be there — weeks, months, longer? — but in very short order, he was pleased with the feel of his new temporary home.

First impression: a very pleasant place to be, and appropriately named.

Golden.

CHAPTER 2

As Theo concluded his stroll along Broadway, he returned to the small coffee shop he had passed earlier that morning. The aroma of caffeine hung like a scented cloud (and functioned as highly effective advertising) at the entrance to the business.

A painted windowpane next to the door identified the establishment in gold letters outlined in black:

The Chalice
Light Street and Broadway
Monday through Thursday, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Friday and Saturday, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.
Sunday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Once inside, Theo took a deep breath and scanned the room.

Standing, sitting, alone and in small clusters of various generations, ethnicity, and attire, people of all sorts had gathered in witness to the shop's magnetic pull.

A young man leaving the building with a cello on his back and a coffee in hand skillfully navigated the tables and the incoming customers with occasional whispers of "excuse me." He caught Theo's eye with a sideways glance, smiled, nodded, and spoke a greeting. Such a thing was unusual, even suspect, in the big cities where Theo had spent most of his life, but he reciprocated the gesture with a nod and a smile, then stepped toward the short line where orders were placed.

He sensed that he might become a regular there, an intuition that proved true for the year he lived in Golden.

If only the coffee is as rich as the ambiance, he thought.

That wishful possibility seemed unlikely.

Theo was used to the strong coffees of Europe — abatanado and café pingado in Lisbon, café con leche in Madrid, espresso in Bologna, café noisette in Marseilles. The American shops had often disappointed him, even in New York, where, for every excellent cup he'd consumed, he had endured a half dozen letdowns. His standards, he had been told, were rather exacting.

The old man exchanged a greeting with the barista at the counter, placed his order, received his drink, and took a seat in a nearby armchair.

He was more than a little surprised at the quality of the espresso and nodded approvingly as the first sip rested on his tongue.

He studied the room: the customers' faces, their voices, greetings, and gestures; the care with which the cheerful barista did his work; the activity from table to table.

But in short order, his attention was drawn to and fixed entirely on the artwork that covered the walls of the shop.

On the left, right, and rear walls were portraits, ninety-two of them in total, done in pencil on white paper and in black frames of three sizes. All had obviously been done by the same artist. And, as if to reflect the customers in the shop at that moment, the collection included a full range of humanity — age, race, and expression. Portraits and portraits and more portraits.

Even from the distance between himself and those framed faces, Theo perceived the richness of detail and delicacy with which they had been rendered. There was a quality to them, an aliveness, that would almost make one believe the people portrayed were spectators of the Chalice rather than mere adornments on the walls.

The old man's mind began to spin a fanciful vision: each of the ninety-two frames is a window. Each face depicted in the frames is standing outside the building, peeking in with amusement at the customers on the inside. At night, when the shop is closed, the faces in the portraits leave their frames, step inside the shop, mingle, talk about who and what they've seen or overheard that day, share stories, and then return home by opening.

He smiled at the colorful, if ludicrous, idea. Such things crossed his mind frequently.

He had the imagination of a poet.

But he had, too, the eyes and mind of a connoisseur. Though he was easily interested in many things, he was keenly interested in a particular few. Portraiture fell into that category.

And so, while he wanted very much to study each of the ninety-two drawings closely and slowly, he decided to wait for a more opportune time, when the shop was less crowded.

For now, he drank his espresso in small, deliberate sips. To do otherwise,

in his mind, would have been disrespectful, even irreverent, to the barista's art. When he finished his drink, he took up his hat, sauntered out of the shop with glances to the left and right, and returned to the hotel.

Later that afternoon, following lunch and a nap, Theo walked to the river, strolled a section of paved pathway south to north, sat for a quarter hour with his face sunward, and then made his way back to the coffee shop. Aside from a few tables occupied by students, the place was empty.

There was no line at the counter when Theo stepped up to place his order.

“Welcome back,” the barista said. “Twice in one day.”

Theo was impressed that the man remembered him, especially given the number of customers who had been in the shop at rush hour earlier in the day.

“My dear fellow, you made a superb espresso this morning. Well done and thank you. Perfectly *je ne sais quoi*. I have returned for the encore.”

The younger man chuckled. He didn’t often hear French in the Chalice. “Well, thank you, sir. I will aim to make this one even better. If it’s not just right, please let me know. My name is Shep. And you are . . .?”

Shep reached a hand across the counter. The old man grasped it in both of his. “My friends call me Theo. It is very nice to meet you.”

Shep noted the precise enunciation and foreign accent in the old man’s speech.

“And you as well. What brings you to Golden?”

”I am here on business. But right now I’m very interested in the portraits.” Theo gestured toward the walls. “I noticed them this morning and am back to look at them more closely. Can you tell me about them?”

By then a group of four women had entered the shop and formed a line behind Theo.

“I’ll be glad to, Mr. Theo, soon as I get a break. But here’s something that will get *you* started. It might answer some of your questions. And I want you to tell me about you when we get a minute.”

Shep handed Theo a local magazine, *The Gold Standard*. On the cover was a picture of the coffee shop, taken at the entrance through a fisheye lens that caught all three walls — left, right, rear — and most of the portraits. In the center of the picture stood Shep and another lean, slightly gray-headed man, dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a tweed jacket. The caption read, “The Art of the Chalice.”

Theo opened the magazine, turned to the article, and began reading.

It began as a lark. A “what if?”

A “would you?”

A “maybe.”

Coffee shop as art gallery.

But that is what the Chalice, one of the city’s most popular downtown businesses, has become in recent months. Located at the corner of Light Street and Broadway, the Chalice is owned and operated by Shep and Addie Carlile, both natives of Golden.

They bought the unoccupied three-story building during the early days of the downtown renaissance and, for almost a year, spent weekends and free time renovating the ground floor. When the building was finally completed, they left their bank jobs, apprenticed at an upscale coffee shop in Atlanta for two months to learn the art of coffee, and eventually opened their doors to strong sales and five-star reviews. The Chalice offers a limited premier assortment of drinks and light pastries.

Since the shop’s opening, a loyal clientele has led to a thriving business. Its location — within two blocks of performance venues, restaurants, retail businesses, the courthouse, and Golden University’s School of Art and Design — provides the Chalice with a steady stream of customers. Go any day at any hour, and you’ll see a variety of faces among the patrons.

Some of those faces never leave the room!

The Chalice is a few streets away from the home and studio of Asher Glissen, also a native of Golden and one of its most prominent artists. Over the course of his career, he has taught private lessons, served as curator of the Bredlow Center for the Arts, illustrated numerous ad pieces and periodicals, and become renowned as a master of portraiture.

When the coffee shop opened, Glissen was one of the first customers in line. He claims to have spent a sizable portion of his retirement savings on coffee within months of the shop’s opening.

A year ago, the Carliles invited Glissen to display some of his artwork in the shop. He took the idea and ran with it.

Shep Carlile explains, “Asher said he had something in mind but didn’t tell us what it was. About a month later, he showed up with half a dozen portraits of some of our regular customers. We were floored. It took off from there. People love it. Some folks come in just to look at the drawings. We’re really proud to have them here.”

There are presently 92 portraits on display. All are for sale. When one sells, another piece takes its place.

Glissen speaks of the coffee shop in glowing terms. “The Chalice has become an institution down here, a real melting pot. I’ve tried to capture that in the portraits. My mother, who was an artist, used to tell me that every face is a story. I think she was right. These drawings are a neighborhood in their own right. It’s been a labor of love to bring them together. I’m thankful that Addie and Shep have given them a home.”

Glissen can often be seen at the Chalice and elsewhere downtown, camera in hand, photographing material for his work. If you’re in the coffee shop, he might well ask you to look his way. If he does, don’t be surprised if you become part of the Chalice gallery.

More customers entered the shop. While Shep prepared their drinks, Theo reread the article, then rose from his chair and walked to the rear of the room.

A dozen portraits, three rows of four, were hung in neat lines on the back wall. Each was a head-and-shoulders composition. Theo removed a pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses from his pocket, looped them over his ears, clasped his hands behind his back, and began to study the drawings from a yard away. One moment his head was held down to look over the top of his eyeglasses; the next his head tilted back to look through the lenses perched at the end of his nose. An art historian at the Louvre could not have been more engaged with or enthralled by the masterpieces at that great museum than the old man was by the portraits in the Chalice.

He moved closer, a foot or so from the wall, and scrutinized each drawing down to the most intricate of pencil lines. He was oblivious to time and to the goings-on in the shop around him.

When Shep had filled all his drink orders, he spotted Theo across the room but chose not to disturb him. He was pleased that the old fellow was so absorbed in the artwork but was also curious at what might be behind such keen interest.

Even as a boy, Theo had been fascinated by fine lines and intricacy. Much of his childhood was spent peering through a magnifying glass at feathers, leaves, and insects in the vineyards around his home. He was bedazzled by spiderwebs, dragonfly wings, and the undersides of mushrooms. He collected postage stamps and was spellbound when he had first seen Da Vinci’s line drawings and sketches. As a young adult and later, it had been his habit to carry a loupe — a gift from a teacher — in his pocket in order to examine small objects and details not visible to the naked eye. For one like him, the portraiture in the Chalice was an embarrassment of riches, a treasure trove, a visual feast.

At every frame, Theo leaned forward and genuflected, a man transfixed.

He moved to the front of the shop and resumed his perusal, once directly over the heads of customers sitting at a table abutting the wall. He begged their pardon but did not alter his course.

For him, each face revealed a mood that hinted at a story and begged a question.

What is that fellow so worried about?

Why is the young woman so bashful?

How would I describe the expression on that child’s face?

And how, dear God, does the artist render each one so convincingly, over

and over?

As he studied the pieces, Theo became increasingly perplexed, troubled even, that so many of the portraits were still available for sale. He was baffled by their price tags. *Only $125 for this? Only $200? They are worth far more than that*. Why, he wondered, were ninety-two portraits of this quality, at these prices, still unsold?

He lingered at the portrait of a young woman with delicate features, unsmiling, and with eyes that looked directly into his. They had a haunting familiarity about them. *Could it be*?

From her, he moved his attention one frame to the right, to the face of a young man looking away from the artist at something outside the frame. What was in those darting eyes? Fear? Suspicion? Contempt? Whatever it was, he seemed ill at ease in front of the camera. He wore a winter cap and a high collar that indicated cold weather.

Theo had been studying the portraits for almost an hour when Shep finally joined him.

“They are something else, aren’t they?”

Shep was wiping his fingers on a hand towel. He nodded to the portrait in front of Theo, the one of the young man with the nervous eyes.

“That fellow’s been through some hard stuff. His little girl got hurt real bad in a car accident a while back. The mother was killed. He doesn’t come here very often, but he usually just wants a regular coffee with room for cream. I don’t think he even knows his picture is up here.”

Theo nodded and turned to Shep.

“Do you know all the people on the walls?”

“I know most of them at least a little bit. Some I know pretty well. Some I don’t know at all. The artist usually writes their names in small letters on the backs of the frames, so I can tell who they are if I need to know for some reason. But Mr. Theo, before we talk about them, please tell me about you. What’s your story? You said you’re new to town. What brings you here? Where’s home?”

Theo waved off the questions before giving a short answer.

“I have lived in a number of places. I was born and raised in the north of Portugal, but I have lived for many years in New York City. I still have a place there, but I’m here on a bit of business, and my home today is Golden. Only one day and already I am very fond of your city. And Mr.

Shep, I particularly like your shop."

The politely vague answer hardly constituted the story that Shep had hoped for, but he didn't press. A fuller version would perhaps unfold in time.

"Please, just call me Shep. That's what my friends call me. No Mister."

"Of course, thank you. And please, call me Theo. Speaking of names, why the Chalice?"

Now it was Shep's time to be evasive. "It had a nice ring to it. I'll tell you the longer story one of these days. Did you read the article about the portraits?"

Theo nodded. "I did, thank you. Very interesting." He handed the magazine back to Shep.

"Mr. Shep — excuse me, Shep — one thing I don't understand. Why do people not buy the portraits?"

Shep grimaced, then rocked his head left to right a couple of times in search of a proper response. "That's a mystery to me, too, Theo. I know Asher's got plenty to do, and he probably doesn't need any more work, but I was hoping this might create some business for him. So far it hasn't worked out that way. Not yet. We sold a good number at Christmas last year, but I'm still waiting for a big breakthrough. I have to believe that one of these days, people are going to realize what a treasure these are. Asher did one of Addie — that's my wife, Addelyn — and it's one of my most prized possessions. If my house ever catches fire, it'll be one of the first things I grab on the way out." Shep hesitated. "We love having them here, but I wish someone would come along and buy all of them."

Theo's eyes widened slightly. He moved his hand to his mouth, thumb under his chin and index finger tapping his lips.

Shep looked toward the counter. A customer was waiting to place an order.

"Theo, I better get back to work. Thanks for coming in. You know, if you become a regular here, there's a good chance you'll end up on the wall someday. Welcome to Golden. Incidentally, how was the coffee?"

"Superb. Exceptionnelle! Maravilhoso!" Theo smiled, applauded softly, then patted Shep on the arm. He walked out of the shop, crossed the street to the median, and took a seat on a bench near the fountain.

He thought of the unsold portraits.

Of the homes that would be beautified and the lives that would be enriched by their presence.

Of the artist who would be encouraged by their sale.

It was there that the idea formed in his mind.

CHAPTER 3

On his second full day in Golden, Theo took an early morning stroll through a residential area south of the hotel known as the Boughery. “Gentrified” was a word often used to describe the area. It was a neighborhood of vintage homes and tastefully pampered lawns that, like the rest of the city, awaited the full pastel explosion of springtime. The fuse of that explosion was burning shorter and shorter as new blossoms opened each day in abundance.

From the Boughery he walked and sat beside the river, as he had done the day before. When he was confident the morning rush had subsided, he returned to the Chalice.

“Theo, welcome back. Two days and you’re already a regular.”

“Good morning, Shep. Yes, indeed, a regular, but also a man under a spell.”

Shep wasn’t sure if the spell was cast by the coffee or the portraits. Maybe both? Either way, he was pleased at the affable newcomer’s presence.

Theo remained at the Chalice until lunchtime, inching his way once again around the walls of the shop. Shep watched the old man with growing curiosity. What could possibly be so interesting?

Before leaving, and after considerable deliberation, Theo purchased the portrait of the young woman with short hair, familiar eyes, and the unsmiling but not unfriendly face.

He paid $125 cash. It felt more like a theft than a purchase.

“Why this one?” Shep asked as he wrapped the portrait in brown paper. “Do you know her?”

Theo shook his head. “I don’t know any of these faces. I would be happy to buy any of them or all of them, but this one intrigues me most at the moment.”

Shep’s curiosity about the old man was only heightened by the purchase, and he could not imagine what Theo had in mind to do. Was he a collector? A critic or a gallerist? Was he hoping to help the artist?

When Theo returned to the hotel for his midday rest, he studied the portrait yet again. The woman’s name, as Shep had told him, was printed in

small letters on the back of the frame.

Minnette Prentiss.

“Yes, I believe you are the one,” Theo whispered.

He searched her name on a computer in the hotel’s business suite and learned that she was a CPA in Golden with a reputable accounting firm. More importantly for his purposes, he now had a mailing address for her.

He began to compose a letter. Over the next couple of days, he worked on and off through multiple drafts, until he was satisfied with his choice of words.

Dear Mrs. Prentiss,

We have never met, and I hope you will forgive me if it is inappropriate for a total stranger to approach you in this manner. I am an old man, 86 to be precise, and a newcomer to your town. I first saw you — actually, a pencil drawing of you — when I was at the Chalice on the Promenade a few days ago.

As I studied your portrait, Mrs. Prentiss, I had a strong sense that it belonged in your possession or in the possession of someone dear to you. After all, it only seems right that the finished work should go to the one who inspired it.

And so, I took the liberty of purchasing the piece with one purpose in mind. I would deem it an honor, and it would be a great kindness to me, if you would accept the portrait as a gift, to do with as you please.

Might I make a proposal? (And I do so beg your pardon if this is entirely out of line.) Next week, on Thursday, at seven o’clock in the evening, I will be sitting on a bench beside the fountain in the median nearest the Chalice. To make myself obvious, in case there are multiple exquisitely handsome 86-year-old men sitting there at the same time, I will be the one wearing a heather green flat cap. It should only take a moment to give you the portrait, though I will have plenty of time to visit should you be inclined and able to do so.

Lest you find this all very odd and out of sorts, let me assure you I am a harmless old man, a widower, a father, a toothless lion with only innocent intentions. If, as has been said, it is more blessed to give than to receive, my happiness in putting the picture in your hands will be

more than adequate recompense for my purchase.
I look forward to meeting you.

With kindest regards,
Theo

CHAPTER 4

“I got the strangest letter today.”

Minnette Prentiss was not inclined to use terms like “strange” unless something actually fit the description. She had long been a stickler for precision, both with words and numbers, even before she attained her license as a certified public accountant.

“What was so strange about it?” Derrick, her husband, was sitting at their kitchen counter, opening mail. He stopped what he was doing as he asked the question. In five years of marriage, he had learned her tones of voice and knew when she wanted his undivided attention. This was one of those moments.

“For one thing, I don’t know who it’s from. You know that pencil portrait at the Chalice? The one that Uncle Asher did? Apparently, somebody bought it, some old guy, and he wants to give it to me as a gift. He wants me to meet him next Thursday at the fountain. Is that strange or what?”

The look of mild interest on Derrick’s face became one of concerned curiosity — head slightly tilted, eyebrows raised.

“That’s putting it mildly. It sounds dangerous to me. You don’t have any idea who it is? You think it might be a joke? Maybe somebody we know?”

“I don’t have any idea who it is, but I don’t think it’s a joke. Here’s the letter. Read it.”

Derrick did so slowly, the wheels of his legal mind questioning and analyzing even as he pored over the words.

Minnette watched him as he read, looking for clues as to what he was thinking, knowing that his face would make a statement long before his mouth did. She could tell immediately he was intrigued.

Beautiful penmanship.

Expensive paper.

Disarming language.

No last name.

No return address.

Odd but somehow credible.

“It’s not what I expected, but it concerns me. Whoever he is, he knows who you are and where you live. But you don’t know either of those things about him. Maybe Asher or Shep can tell us something about him. Or somebody else at the coffee shop. That’s where the guy would have gotten the portrait, right?”

In the six years since Derrick had graduated from law school, he had worked as a prosecutor for the district attorney’s office in Golden. He knew most members of local law enforcement. Perhaps someone at GPD would have some words of caution or counsel concerning the mysterious letter.

“Or maybe we could just show up next Thursday and see what happens.”

Minnette said it with a finality that suggested she had already made up her mind. Before Derrick could object, she continued. “I’ve read the letter four times, start to finish, and I could be crazy or naive, but I think it’s totally innocent. I think there really might be an old man who just wants to do something nice. What was that phrase you used the other day about the homeless woman on the bike? ‘Benign eccentricity’? Maybe that’s all it is.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” Derrick asked. “What if he’s a stalker or somebody mad at me for some case I’ve handled? What if he’s the brother of the gang member we sent away for life last month?”

Minnette rolled her eyes. “If it were any of those, I doubt they would have gone to all this trouble just to be a bother. And it looks like he wrote with a fountain pen. On linen paper, no less.” She paused. “You know what I thought at first?”

Derrick leaned forward on the counter, lacing his fingers together. “What did you think at first?”

“I thought it was you.”

Their eyes met.

“I thought maybe you’d bought the picture, like you said you were going to do a month ago. And I thought maybe you’d gotten someone to write in their very best handwriting on this two-dollar paper, and I halfway expect that you’ll be sitting at the fountain on Thursday. Am I right?”

Derrick blushed and grinned. “I wish you were. And I’m sorry I’ve been dragging my feet, but I promise I didn’t write the letter. You don’t *really* think you should meet the guy, do you?”

“Only if you agree. But I’d like to. We don’t have anything on the calendar for Thursday night. I say we show up, meet the mysterious stranger, and then go somewhere for supper and admire the girl in the picture frame.”

She laughed, then walked around the counter, stood behind Derrick, wrapped her arms around his neck, and nuzzled his cheek.

“I don’t feel very comfortable about this,” he whispered.

“I totally understand. And I’m glad you love me enough to worry about it. But do this for me: read the letter three more times, with no distractions. If you don’t think we should go after that, we won’t go. The risk seems pretty minimal, if you ask me. It’ll be in broad daylight, people everywhere, and if we don’t like what we see at the fountain, we don’t even have to go there, right? We can take binoculars and do surveillance from a hundred yards away and then decide what to do. OK? This might be a story we tell our children someday. Now, leave and I’ll fix something for supper.”

CHAPTER 5

Derrick did as Minnette requested. After washing the dishes and making a couple of phone calls, he took the curious letter to his office, a large closet with an old desk and chair where he sometimes retreated to study, pay bills, or answer emails.

In the low light of a table lamp, he read the letter, his skepticism on high alert.

And again.

And once more.

There was, Derrick had to admit, an undeniable sincerity, an innocence, a timidity, about it. Even humor: "exquisitely handsome 86-year-old man." With each reading, his defenses softened, but he remained wary. It was disquieting that the writer had been so guarded about his identity, that he had gone to considerable pains to identify, locate, and reach out to a very attractive young woman, and that he presented so many questions that could not be answered.

What a baffling epistle.

Later that night, Derrick and Minnette lay in bed, talking.

"OK, so what do you think?" she asked.

"I did what you asked. I read it three times, and I'm still concerned."

"How concerned?"

"Not much, really. You gotta admit, it's pretty weird, but unless I have nightmares between now and Thursday or change my mind for some other reason, I guess I feel the same as you. This defies my cautiousness and, my god, this is my wife I'm talking about, but I think there really might be an old man who really does just want to give you a gift, though I can't imagine why. So, we show up Thursday, stand at a safe distance from the fountain, and see what we see. If there's not a heather-green flat cap at the fountain, or if we see the cap and it's on the head of a wild man, we call the police. Does that seem like the right approach? Have we lost our minds?"

Minnette snickered. "Counselor, are we actually thinking of doing something risky? The CPA and the lawyer? The two highly cautious,

supremely rational type A's? Just think, we might actually meet a sincerely kind human being. There don't seem to be many of those around these days."

Derrick kissed Minnette. “I get to sleep with one every night.” He paused. “One more thing. I’m going to call your Uncle Asher tomorrow. Since he did the portrait, maybe he’ll know something about the letter. He might even be part of this whole thing. I still think this might be a prank of some kind.”

Minnette nodded her approval. “That makes sense.” She rolled toward him, a smile in her eyes. “You know, Mr. Prentiss, this never would have happened if you’d bought the picture when you said you were going to.”

“Touché. Goodnight, Mrs. Prentiss.”

“Night.”

“Hey, by the way, what in the world is a ‘flat cap’?”

“Google it. Night.”

In the studio of Asher Glissen, the portrait artist, the phone rang. He rarely allowed it in the studio when he was working, but he was expecting a call about a new commission. He looked at the screen and read the name. It was not the anticipated call, but he answered it anyway.

“Well, good morning, Derrick. How’s my favorite nephew-in-law?”

Derrick chuckled. “Your *only* nephew-in-law is doing fine this morning, thank you.”

“And how is my beautiful niece?”

“Minnette is fine.”

“Why in the world is a busy lawyer like you calling a lowly artist like me at this hour of the day?”

It was ten o’clock.

“Court’s in recess. I just got out of a hearing on an awful case. You probably heard about it. A guy fell asleep at the wheel, crossed the center line and killed a woman and really messed up a little girl. The driver’s been charged with vehicular homicide. He’s an illegal. Everybody loses on this one. Anyway, I had a few minutes before the next hearing and wanted to run somethin’ by you. It involves one of the portraits you put up at the Chalice. You gotta minute?”

Derrick read the letter to Asher.

Asher responded slowly. “Wow. That *is* sort of strange. I see why you’d be worried. But Derrick, to answer your question, I don’t know

anything about the man and, if this is a joke, I don't know anything about that either. Taking care of Minnette comes first. But, let me get this right. The guy, this Mr. Theo, wants to meet Minnette on the Promenade, in public, in broad daylight, so he can give her the portrait, right? And if y'all were to accept his invitation, you could see him from a long way off before you actually get to the fountain?"

It was the same conversation Derrick and Minnette had had the night before.

Asher had often wondered how Derrick could work criminal cases day in and day out without becoming totally jaded and distrustful of the entire human race. He understood Derrick's apprehension, but he was also rather pleased that an old man had dreamt up such a generous scheme, if in fact that's what it was.

"Derrick, I know you and Minnette will do the right thing. Let me know how it goes." He chuckled. "Heck, I might need to write the old guy a thank-you note. People like me need people like him."

"Thanks, Uncle Asher. I'll keep you posted. Back to the battlefield."

Asher ended the call and resumed work at his drawing table. Beneath the skylight in the vaulted ceiling of his studio, he was himself a study in light and shadow as rays of morning sun dappled the room.

For him, it was an ordinary day at work.

He was wearing a loose flannel shirt (Payne's gray, "the color of English rain") with sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, tan cotton khaki pants with specks and smudges of color, and sock feet. His brown hair, finger-combed with artistic haphazardness, revealed touches of gray and fell over his ears and shirt collar. A day's worth of beard, maybe two, highlighted the contours of his face, his prominent jawline and cheekbones.

A slight frown, his expression of attentiveness and concentration, was often present when he worked. His eyes were intent, purposeful, engaged. And yet, for all its seriousness, it was not an unwelcoming face. Children could hold his gaze easily, and older subjects had learned to interpret his studious look as a compliment.

There was nothing wildly bohemian about his appearance, but there was enough to set him apart from his mid-fiftyish contemporaries who reported to banks or law offices or real estate agencies each morning for their daily bread. His wardrobe, unlike many of theirs, suggested a life free of supervision or a need to impress.

Open windows welcomed birdsong into the studio. The avian notes mixed with something orchestral playing on a small stereo nearby.

“Appalachian Spring”? The song was appropriate to the time and place, that room full of simple gifts.

Music was a pleasant companion to the isolation in which he often worked speechlessly for hours at a stretch.

A photograph, placed on an easel an arm’s length in front of him, was the subject of his work that morning.

He sat as he drew. His right hand steadied a thin rectangular lapboard. A pristine piece of ninety-pound cotton paper, Stonehenge white, was affixed by thumbtacks at each corner.

His weapons of choice, all crowded into his right hand as he drew with his left, were 2B and 2H pencils, a stick of charcoal, a well-worn tortillon, and a kneaded eraser. With those simple tools, that arsenal, he waged daily war against mediocrity and was rewarded with masterpiece after masterpiece.

Slowly, as if rising through water, the shape of a head became apparent. Asher filled the outline, heavier lines first, followed by lighter ones and more delicate details. More lines and more lines, and the features — brow, lip, nostrils, crease — began to emerge.

His hand twisted, turned, tapped, danced, hovered, and stroked the page in a choreography that had taken years to perfect.

A man’s face began to emerge from the lines, a man with big, untamed hair, a scruffy beard, a boyish grin, and a class-clown playfulness in his eyes. It was a difficult energy to reproduce on a two-dimensional surface, but Asher wrestled it convincingly to the mat.

He stood from time to time, stepped back, studied his progress, returned, and then resumed.

By the end of the morning, the portrait was complete and ready for the frame.

For the Chalice.

That night, when Derrick got home, he told Minnette about his conversation with Uncle Asher.

It was decided.

Next Thursday, they would be at the fountain.

CHAPTER 6

By Thursday evening, Derrick and Minnette were a giddy mixture of adventure and mild apprehension. As their curiosity about the letter grew, their concern about the possibility of foul play all but vanished. Derrick's one lingering concern, negligible at best, was about how they might be perceived in the eyes of their peers if they foolishly walked into a scam of some kind. They discussed, one last time, the option of going directly to the restaurant and skipping the fountain rendezvous altogether. But the intrigue had them in its grasp and they agreed to carry on.

"This might just be something we tell our children about someday. "

At half an hour before the appointed time, they parked a couple of blocks from the fountain and then walked, holding hands, to their meeting with Theo. The sidewalk tables at the pubs and restaurants along Broadway were all occupied, and foot traffic was robust, made up predominantly of college students and other adherents to the idea that weekends begin on Thursday. The hour was a pleasant combination of cool air and sunbathed pavement. The shadows of early evening were feather soft, and *joie de vivre* prevailed up and down the Promenade.

Minnette and Derrick's eyes were laser focused on the fountain from the moment it came into view, but passing cars, pedestrians, and the need to watch where they were going made it difficult to see who, if anyone, was sitting there. Four benches were placed symmetrically around the fountain. The two that were most clearly visible were occupied by hatless sitters. The other two were difficult to see. But finally, at fifty yards or so, a heather-green flat cap shone like a beacon.

Their stomachs jumped.

"Derrick, there he is," Minnette whispered. She giggled in nervous disbelief. Her grip tightened around Derrick's hand, and her body leaned into his. The old man was really there.

And then a voice. A loud, unignorable voice.

"Well, Derrick, it's about time. Are you ready to buy a book? Please

buy a book.”

The voice belonged to Tony the bookseller. His shop, the Verbivore, was on the west side of Broadway, a stone’s throw from the fountain.

He rose from a wicker chair and snuffed out a cigarette underfoot. He hugged the couple, whom he knew well, and kissed Minnette on the cheek for good measure. Usual greetings were exchanged while Derrick and Minnette looked repeatedly toward the median. They both hoped Tony might sense their preoccupation, but it was not to be. True to form whenever he wanted someone’s full attention, the bookseller kept a hand on Derrick’s shoulder.

“Derrick, no kiddin’, really, I have the book I was telling you about the other day, the one by Edward Albee. If you don’t buy it, I’ll give it to you and then file for bankruptcy. Read it and then let’s discuss it. You can’t say no. Come on, you can’t be in that big of a hurry. It’ll only take a minute. I put it on the stack in my office.”

Derrick’s protest fell on deaf ears. As Tony ushered him to the entrance of the bookshop, he looked dejectedly over his shoulder at Minnette and mouthed, “I’ll be right back. Sorry.”

Minnette looked toward the fountain.

She immediately resumed walking.

The old man was sitting with the portrait across his lap, hands on his knees, watching passersby. He appeared at ease and seemed happily entertained by the people around him. He said something to a little girl who was standing beside the fountain with her parents. Minnette could not hear the words but could tell they were friendly.

If she could have read Theo’s thoughts at that moment, she would have discerned an ambivalence that was not obvious in his demeanor. Earlier, as the old man had walked to the fountain, he had fidgeted nervously, checking his appearance repeatedly in the reflection of storefront windows, adjusting his hat, rehearsing possible first lines, and imagining how he might handle anger or apprehension if his well-intended mission did not go as planned. He almost hoped Mrs. Prentiss might not show up, and he could put this whole silly idea to rest.

But show up she did.

When he first saw her — easily recognizable after spending so much time with the portrait — Theo’s polite, deeply instilled inclination was to stand and step toward her. Instead, he remained seated until she was only a few steps away. He had been saving the bench for their visit and did not wish to run the risk of losing it by leaving it unoccupied. The fountain was a popular place at that hour of the day.

He rose, removed his hat as a gesture of respect, and stepped toward Minnette.

He was dressed fashionably: a handsome cashmere blazer, olive-green trousers, and cream-colored linen shirt. Minnette had half-expected to meet a frail, bent, cane-bearing old man, a pale, sleepy-eyed relic. Instead, she was met by a spry, bright-eyed soul of medium height

and portly build who stood solidly on his own two feet. He had a faint stoop to his shoulders but otherwise no pronounced signs of age.

Gray-white hair, receding but full, was combed back but not fussed over, giving him an aura worthy of the description "distinguished." He was clean-shaven.

His skin, tan and healthy, hinted that he might be a man who had spent considerable time outdoors. Full eyebrows, nicely trimmed, tapered into smile lines that were etched into the corners of his eyes. He wore a subtle cologne, something only a woman would notice, and presented himself, in general, as a man well-cared-for but not obsessed with his appearance. He was obviously old but a "young old," in a way that would almost make a younger soul look forward to seniority.

As Minnette held out her hand to shake his, the thing that struck her most was the warmth of the old man's face: the gentle, immediate, half-timid smile, and the piercing soft blue eyes that looked intently, even adoringly, into her face. And a sense — something she could feel even if she couldn't explain or define it — that he had anticipated and now took delight at being in her presence.

***Yes, I believe you are the one,* Theo thought.**

He removed his cap at her approach and bowed slightly as he took her hand. She had offered her right hand in the authoritative manner of a business meeting — more habit than intent — but he took it in his left hand, in a way that hinted at some long-ago order of doing things.

Minnette was not offended. His smile, the barely upturned corners of his mouth, stayed fixed. As did his eyes, on hers.

Those eyes glistened with evening light, and his face bore a radiance of sincere gladness. It took Minnette by surprise. *Very* pleasant surprise.

"So, you're Mr. Theo?" Minnette spoke hesitantly as she said it. And, as if some law of mutuality had become operative at the moment, she mirrored his smile.

"And you are Minnette. Thank you for coming. I was not at all certain you would be here. But I'm very grateful." He chuckled. "Please forgive me if I am a bit nervous. I've been afraid that at seven o'clock a policeman would arrive and put me in handcuffs and send me far away. Instead, I have the pleasure of meeting an angel. I am very

happy to see you."

***So "old school,"* Minnette thought. *And so wonderful*.**

She detected his accent.

"And it's very nice to meet you, Mr. Theo." Any apprehension Minnette might have had about the meeting *was* already dispelled, and she felt badly that Theo had himself been frightened about the prospect of an unpleasant outcome. "But Mr. Theo, please tell me, why are you doing this? I don't mean to be rude, but I don't understand why we're here."

Minnette had not intended to be so abrupt, but it was the question that had vexed her since she'd received the old man's letter.

He inhaled deeply and nodded. "Yes, I suppose it must seem a bit strange. If you have a moment or two, maybe I can explain. I don't mean to take your time if you're in a hurry. Here is the portrait."

He gestured toward the wrapped picture.

"Yes, please tell me. I'm not in a hurry."

They stepped toward the bench. He waited for her to sit first, and then they sat, angled slightly toward each other. The fountain exhaled a silver mist, like fairy dust, as the first bestowal began.

The first of many.

CHAPTER 7

Derrick finally freed himself from Tony — not an easy thing to do when Tony wanted to chat — and hurried back to the sidewalk. It was minutes before seven o’clock, and he knew Minnette would be eager to move on.

When he stepped outside, she was not in front of the book shop where he had left her. He looked down the sidewalk. No Minnette.

Then, looking toward the fountain, he saw them: the old man and the attentive face of his young wife, already absorbed in a conversation entirely their own. The moment had the elements of a storybook: stately oak, gleam of water, pastel hues of springtime, spectral sunlight. Derrick remained where he was and stood out of sight — not that either of them was looking around at the moment — and watched them intently from the thirty or so yards that separated them. After a few moments, he walked inconspicuously to the median and sat on the bench across the fountain from them. From there he continued to observe them through the cascade of water, convinced that whatever else the old man might be, he was not a danger.

"So, why am I doing this? Yes, it is a fair question. I have never done something quite like this before."

Theo laughed inaudibly to himself, *at* himself. His smile widened; the lines around his eyes multiplied and deepened as he looked at Minnette.

"And I don't know that I can tell you exactly how the idea occurred to me or why. When I saw all the faces there on the wall — I looked at them for hours — I felt something for them, as if I knew all of you somehow or wanted to know you. A good artist can make one do that, you know? The display is beautiful, of course — I'm sure you've seen it, yes? — but the portraits, at least to me, all seemed to belong somewhere else. Not on the wall of a coffee shop, at least not for long. I intend to buy all of them one by one and send them to their homes."

He paused and looked at his hands, at the wrapped portrait. Minnette said nothing, so he continued, his voice barely audible above the street noise and fountain. "Well, honestly, I was surprised that so many of the portraits had not yet been bought by their rightful owners, ones like you. Or at least by someone who loves you."

Minnette nodded, smirked, and rolled her eyes. "Funny you should say that. My husband was supposed to buy mine weeks ago, but he kept putting it off. It is very nice of you to do this. I was a bit suspicious when I first got your letter."

Theo nodded. "I'm not surprised by that at all, and I am happy for your bravery. Maybe this is a way for me to make some friends here in

Golden.”

“You said in your letter that you’re a newcomer here. Are you here to stay? Do you have family here?”

The old man paused and squinted with a tilt of the head. ”I’m not so sure. But I’m happy to be here for now, and I like the town very much. Have you lived here all your life?”

It would occur to Minnette later that Theo had artfully evaded her inquiry and somehow kept the conversation focused on her. He was a flurry of questions, all very appropriate and asked in a tone of genuine interest. His eyes were fixed on hers, unwandering, and he leaned toward her in a way that suggested total presence. She told him briefly of her childhood and education, her work as an accountant, her marriage five years ago to her high school sweetheart, and a bit about her life in the community. Her answers were general but enough to paint a picture of her world.

Theo condensed it into a simple summary. “Your life seems like a very happy story, yes?”

Minnette answered hesitantly. “I suppose so. Not perfect, but mostly . . . pretty happy.”

Theo sensed there was a longer, truer answer. Her voice was tinged with regret but he dared not pry. He would take only what she offered.

“So, Mr. Theo, have you given any other portraits away?”

“My dear, you are the first.” A broad smile covered his face.

“Really? Well, I’m honored. But why me? Why did you choose this one first?”

Theo nodded, gratified by a confidence that seemed, in so short a time, to exist between them.

“Yes, why you?” He took a slow, thoughtful inhalation. “Well, two things. When I looked at all the faces in the gallery and had the idea to find their owners, I thought it would be good to choose the kindest face among them, the gentlest of them all, and give that one first. I didn’t know how my idea might be received, so I asked myself, who looks most likely to humor an old man with a silly idea? There are many kind faces there, you know, but this one,” Theo pointed to the wrapped portrait and then to Minnette, “this one was the kindest. I hoped to begin with someone who seemed forgiving in case I am making a

mistake. So that is one reason."

Minnette held her peace, but her eyes glistened and filled. The kindest face among them?

Everything about the moment caught her by surprise: the reverence with which the old man spoke of her, the gentleness of his voice, the generosity of his assessment. *Does he really see that in me*?

"But there was another reason. I am almost embarrassed to tell you.

Shall I?"

She nodded.

Theo removed the paper from Minnette's portrait and held it upright on his knees.

"There is something in these eyes that remind me of a girl I knew many years ago, long before you were born. A girl I knew in Spain. I loved her very much, but I was a foolish young man, and I lost her. She was very beautiful, very intelligent, and very brave. It has been a long time, more than half a century, but still, after all these years, I have never forgotten her, and when I saw your eyes, all this," Theo moved his fingers tenderly across the portrait, in a caress, on the eyelids, the brow, the cheekbone, "I was reminded of her. And I was so pleased to recall that memory."

Theo chuckled. "Does it embarrass you to hear an old man who you barely know talking about being in love? I should bite my tongue. But even old men have young memories."

"No, no, please, tell me more." Minnette laughed. "I mean, it *is* rather embarrassing — not really, I'm teasing — but tell me more."

And so, he did, willing to tell *only* the truth but not *all* the truth.

"Well, the girl. She cared for every living thing and for people in the most simple ways. We would go to the park to feed the birds, and she would bring sweets for the children. Oh, how she loved the children. And oh, how the children loved her. She would tell them stories and sing to them. You could look in her eyes, and you could see all love and kindness there."

Theo paused. His eyes went distant, and the light in them dimmed ever so slightly. "I don't know for certain, but I think her father was a difficult man. I never met him, but I think he was very much brain and not very much heart."

Minnette's smile faded, and her eyes narrowed with total attention to the story Theo was telling.

"You see, he wanted her to be a business person, even before women were so much in business, to help run his company and to make lots of money. She wanted to be a hundred things other than that. A mother. An artist. A gardener. She was his only child, and she felt she would never, could never, be what he had wanted of her. She saw only what her father saw, a girl who cared for stupid things. She felt it. She told me so.

". . . But my, she was a beautiful girl, a wonderful soul. And when I saw your eyes and your face, Minnette, I saw her. So, I chose you. How could I not?"

Theo paused, his gaze fixed on the portrait. He tapped it with his finger.

"There is strength in this face."

He paused again. "And bravery."

Another pause. "And kindness. . . . Yes."

And then, a bit more softly, "And sadness. The good kind. It is all there."

Minnette looked at her portrait in the frame but was clearly lost in thought. She swallowed.

"So, you see sadness?"

Theo gave a small nod of affirmation and grimaced slightly. "The face belongs to one who has suffered loss. That is what I thought when I first saw it. But perhaps I am mistaken. I hope I'm wrong."

When he turned to look at Minnette, thinking perhaps it was time to find another subject of conversation, he saw that her eyes were pooling with tears.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

"It's OK, Mr. Theo. I didn't know it was so obvious. But . . ." Her voice broke. Theo remained silent and gave her time to catch her breath. Finally, she spoke again. "The portrait *is* telling you the truth. Well, sort of. I don't know that there is any strength or bravery or kindness, but there is sadness in that face. It has been there for a long time, and it seems to get deeper and deeper. It doesn't really make any sense, and it seems so stupid."

Theo shook his head. “No, my dear. Sadness might be many things, but it is rarely stupid. The good sadness, I think, is always trying to tell us something very important.”

Minnette let that thought settle in her mind. Was it possible that, so quickly, the innocent exchange of a portrait, an unexpected gift, had opened the hearts of two total strangers to one another, across generations and backgrounds and homelands? That she would bare her soul to an old man whom she had known for only a matter of minutes? That she, the girl who never cried, would do so now?

“When I was a little girl, my parents split up. I was too young to know what was going on, but I’ve heard it was pretty ugly. I come from a long line of blue blood. Do you know that term? It means we’ve been here a long time, respectable, connected, all that. When my parents’ battle was over, my mother moved to Europe, and I’ve hardly seen her since then. And my father is a very, very difficult man.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Being a dad is not his forte. He’s all money, all the time. He still lives here, and I still see him occasionally, and we sort of talk, but it’s all business stuff. Very transactional. You’ve said more fatherly things to me in a half hour than he’s said to me my whole life.”

She paused and took a calming breath. “But I was really fortunate. I was raised here in Golden by my grandmother and grandfather, on my dad’s side, not too far from here, down in the Boughery District. They’ve both passed away, but I was very close to my grandmother. I called her ‘Gammy.’ She was a saint, sort of like the woman you loved in Spain. She enjoyed books and flowers and birds. She surrounded me with those things. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, so she was my whole world in some ways. She took me to school in the mornings, helped me with homework, taught me to cook, and said prayers with me at bedtime. I had a really good childhood even though I knew it was not like everybody else’s. Growing up with Gammy was a gift to me, the unintended blessing of my busted home.

“I was a really good student growing up, all because of Gammy. But no matter how good I did, my father pushed for more. I had to excel, to be better than everybody else. And for reasons I’ll never understand, I always wanted to please him.”

Minnette paused and waved dismissively. “Mr. Theo, I’m sorry. I know you didn’t come here for this.”

“Oh, no. Please, my dear. I came here precisely for this.” He looked squarely into Minnette’s face. “Since I bought your portrait, I have looked at it over and over and I have wondered, ‘What is she like? What is her story? What is really in her eyes?’ Please go on. Have you time?”

It dawned on Minnette that Derrick was supposed to have been a part of this meeting and that they had planned on dinner afterwards. She was certain he must be somewhere nearby and was keeping his distance as a matter of choice. She would thank him later.

“So, I became really good at living up to people’s expectations of me. Too good. I was valedictorian, summa cum laude, president of this and that, homecoming court, debutante, a regular approval junkie. And now I’m a junior partner in a respectable Big Four accounting firm in a job I can barely stand. If I give them sixty hours a week until I’m old, I’ll be a partner someday. And my father is still disappointed I’m not a doctor. But you know what I really want, Mr. Theo? . . . Don’t laugh.”

The expression on Theo’s face made it clear he would not take her words lightly.

“More than anything else in the world, I want to be a mom. I’ve always wanted that.” She let the words sink in, as if expecting a reply, a platitude, maybe even a rebuke. Theo merely nodded, as if to affirm the sanity and beauty of her desire.

“Crazy, right? I know it would be a major change, especially for somebody who’s spent her whole life trying to impress others, and I know I probably romanticize the whole motherhood thing in my mind, but still, I want to give a child what Gammy gave me. I want to be like her. Just a housewife. At least for enough years to grow a family. That sounds insane, doesn’t it? Housewife. A psychologist would have a heyday with me. Here I am, the daughter of the world’s worst father and mother, and I want more than anything else to have a child and be a mom and take care of a life.

“So . . . the sadness. I think there was already a lot from my childhood, but, years ago, when my husband and I were dating in college, I got pregnant. He was in law school, and I was studying accounting. I was afraid and confused at first but sort of excited too. I made the mistake of going to my father for advice. I knew better, but Gammy was already sick with Alzheimer’s, so I didn’t want to trouble her. I told my dad I was going to drop out of school and marry Derrick. We knew we were going to get married someday anyway. My father went berserk, called me some terrible names, reminded me of all the hard work and sacrifice he’d made for me, and told me to the penny

how much my college was costing him. He said I could have a ‘damn kid’ later on, anytime I wanted. He said I’d be letting everybody down, even Gammy, if I let one stupid mistake get in the way of my future. And of course,” Minnette’s tone turned sarcastic, “I’d be a disgrace to the family name. It was quite the speech. Like I say, he’s not a very touchy-feely sort of man. Purely pragmatic. And for some reason, I gave in.”

A short, dense silence followed. Finally, Minnette turned toward Theo.

“So much for strength and bravery.” Then another pause.

“So much for kindness.”

She gazed vacantly at her portrait, shook her head almost imperceptibly, and then continued. “I made my dear old dad proud. Miss Pragmatic. Career first. I’ve kept the sad part of my life a well-hidden secret, but I’ve hated myself a little bit every day since then. I know I shouldn’t let it bother me or feel all this hurt and shame . . .” Minnette paused. Her eyes filled.

“So, Mr. Theo, that might be the sadness you see.”

Minnette closed her eyes and bowed her head, then leaned into Theo’s shoulder.

Derrick watched, spellbound, from across the fountain. He resisted the impulse to make sure she was alright, sensing she would not want him there.

After a long minute, Minnette sat up and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

“Oh, Mr. Theo. My god, I don’t know what I’m thinking. I’m so sorry. I’ve never told this to anyone before. Only my husband and one other person know what I just told you.”

Theo took her hand. ”I’m honored. And I give you my promise: Your words are safe with me. I don’t have many virtues, but I am good, one of the very best, at keeping secrets.” (He might have added “at living a secret.”)

A tear ran down Minnette’s cheek. “Oh my gosh. What’s going on with me? Accountants aren’t supposed to cry.”

They both laughed — a welcome relief — and sat quietly for a moment. Minnette took a deep breath, relaxed her shoulders and shook her head like someone coming out of a trance. And then, with a detectable lightness of voice and grin on her face, she turned to the old man.

“Theo, on an entirely different note, get this. You might be interested in knowing my father’s name. His first name is Pearce. His last name is Glissen. Pearce Glissen.”

Theo squinted, his brow furrowed. There *was* something familiar about the name, but what?

“My dad is the brother of the artist who did this portrait. Asher Glissen and Pearce Glissen. The artist is my Uncle Asher. No two brothers in the history of the world could be more different than they

are. I still can't believe they both came from Gammy."

Theo droned a long 'so-o-o' as he processed Minnette's revelation. "So, Asher the artist and Pearce, your dad, are brothers. And their mother, Gammy, raised you. My, my. So, you must know the artist quite well."

"I know him very, very well. Much better than I know my own dad. And I adore my Uncle Asher."

"And I'm sure you have seen your uncle's portraits many times before?"

"Of course. All my life, I've seen his work. I spent lots of time with him and Aunt Brooke — that's his wife — when I was growing up. They have one daughter too. Samantha. I call her 'Sam.' We practically grew up together."

"Minnette, I'm curious, why did you come here this evening? I think Mr. Asher might have given you the portrait if you'd asked."

She nodded. "I'm sure he would have. But for once I wanted to do something brave."

They continued talking, mostly Theo asking questions and Minnette answering. About CPA work. About Golden. About Uncle Asher. About Gammy. He finally apologized for keeping her so long and thanked her for welcoming him to the city.

And then, with a touch of the theatrical but in a voice heard only by her, he held out the portrait and declared, "Mrs. Minnette Glissen Prentiss, before I go, I remind you, this face belongs to one who is strong and brave and kind. It belongs to one who is capable of saintliness. You, my dear, are Gammy's pride and joy, the gold of Golden, the wine of the Chalice, and, for an old man new to your town, a great blessing. I present to you this, the portrait of St. Minnette."

He bowed his head ceremoniously and handed her the picture. "My dear . . . for you." The hint of a laugh bore witness to a man whose heart was full.

Minette nodded in reply to his bow and accepted the gift. She was surprised by a faint quiver of her lips when she attempted to thank him.

The evening had eased through twilight into early darkness. The old man's wish had been fulfilled, the suspicions of the young woman had

been put to rest, the gift had been given.

When Theo asked if he might walk Minnette to her car or wherever she needed to go, she thanked him but declined the offer, telling him that she wanted to sit by the fountain a while longer. Had she been thinking more clearly at that moment, she might have asked him to join her and Derrick for supper. She might have asked him for an address or phone number or even his full name. But none of that occurred to her.

With awareness that their conversation and first meeting were drawing to a close, Theo made a request. "Minnette, please do thank your uncle for me. Perhaps I will meet him, too, someday. Tell him he has the great admiration and respect of an old man from Portugal."

Portugal? Minnette realized she knew next to nothing about her benefactor. If asked later to describe him, she would only be able to say he was a gracious old man, interesting, attentive, and inquisitive. And, at least once upon a time, in love.

"And please thank Mr. Prentiss for me as well. Goodnight, my dear." He put on his hat and turned to go.

After he had taken a few steps, Minnette called his name.

He turned.

"You *are* an exquisitely handsome eighty-six-year-old man."

He smiled, tipped his hat, and walked away.

Minnette remained seated, held the portrait to her chest with folded arms, and stared into the waters of the fountain. Derrick, deeply curious about what he had just witnessed, had the instinctive presence of mind to let her sit alone a while longer. Stillness came hard for her — another byproduct of being raised to value efficiency and achievement as supreme virtues — but she seemed at rest, childlike and unhurried, even as the Promenade busied itself around her.

When she finally looked around and spotted Derrick, she waved him over.

They sat silently. She took a deep breath, pulled his arm around her, leaned into his shoulder, and felt her eyes become teary for reasons she could not possibly put into words. She would tell Derrick all about the bestowal later. For now, she simply whispered, "I'm glad you didn't buy the portrait."

In the following days, they lived in a slightly altered state of mind, as if having been visited by a vision or a spirit. They could have told others what had happened — ”we met the most unusual old man the other day” — but they never did, for fear that doing so would be a violation of something sacred.

They would, however, tell their children about it someday.

They hung the picture in the bedroom, at the place where Minnette often stood to dress in the mornings. Had anyone walked in at the right moment and listened carefully, they might have heard her whisper, “Good morning, St. Minnette. You are strong. And you are brave. And you are kind. Even when you are sad.”

CHAPTER 8

The following day, Theo sat beside the river reliving his meeting with Minnette. His "silly idea" began to solidify in his mind as a calling, a mission.

***But who shall I do next*?**

Given that there were ninety-two portraits on the Chalice wall, he thought it might be helpful to devise some process for selecting which ones to give and in what order. Maybe start at the front wall, right side, and work all the way around the room? Or work oldest to youngest? Or close his eyes and choose whichever one he saw first when he opened them?

He finally decided to be led by two considerations: first, sheer intuition — which one *felt* right; which one seemed most colorful or interesting in some indefinable way; which one, at first glance, made him say to himself, "I think I would enjoy meeting that person." Second, he would look for faces that had suffered loss, those who seemed to be weary or worried or troubled somehow. Theo hoped that a gift to them might be particularly helpful or encouraging.

Both criteria were nebulous and subjective at best, but the method proved satisfactory. Theo always began with the eyes. It was usually there that he found his purchase. Part of Asher Glissen's astonishing genius lay in his ability to capture not merely the physical qualities but also the personalities of his subjects. Mood, temperament, and story were embedded in every face.

The pleasant reality about Theo's selection process was this: It was impossible to make a wrong choice.

CHAPTER 9

By the end of his first two weeks in Golden, Theo had indeed become a regular at the Chalice, had become familiar with the Boughery, had found a favorite bench at the riverside, had befriended Shep, had purchased and bestowed the portrait on Minnette, and had become thoroughly acquainted with Broadway.

Every day, he walked past the Verbivore bookshop, sometimes more than once. He frequently saw a man, whom he assumed to be the shop's owner, sitting in a wicker chair near the entrance. Theo had a mind to stop and pay a visit sometime soon.

Day sixteen, for no particular reason, was the day.

Tony was sitting by himself, cigarette and newspaper in hand. It was early, and many of the nearby businesses were still closed.

"Good morning, sir," Theo said, greeting him. He knew by then that such behavior was acceptable as a southern practice. "Are you the proprietor here?"

His accent and his use of the word "proprietor" immediately marked Theo as a visitor to the city. Tony stood and stepped toward him.

"Yessir. I'm the owner. Good mornin'."

“Well, if you are open for business, I’m looking for a book about the history of your city.”

Tony smirked. “Well, I’m open, and let me be honest, there aren’t any good books about the history of our city.” He spoke with the certainty and confidence of an expert. “If you want to know the history of this place, it might be easier to make one up yourself. But I do have some books that *claim* to tell you what’s happened here in the past. I can hardly give the damn things away, so they’re real cheap. Or if you just want to borrow it, that’s OK too.”

As Tony spoke, he felt the old man’s warm, fearless gaze. His eyes were clear and alert, a blend of melancholy and good humor.

Theo smiled and patted Tony’s arm. “Let me buy whatever you think is best. And if I have questions about what I read, I will bring them to you. Maybe we could make up a history together.”

Tony’s eyes widened and warmed to the suggestion. “That we can do. And I have a whole staff that can help us. There’s a group of old guys who sit here with me most days, and they’re the biggest bunch of liars you’ll ever meet. Better than a room full of senators.”

He rubbed the light patch of whiskers on his chin with the back of his fingers. “Let’s go inside, and I’ll get a book for you. I know one that you might enjoy. The author was a local newspaper guy for years. And better yet, he married into one of the old families. Now that’s how you really learn the history. By the way, my name is Tony.”

“Nice to meet you, Tony. I’m Theo.”

They shook hands and stepped out of the morning light into the dim confines of the shop. Theo breathed in the rich scent of old paper and scanned the mélange of shelves and tables. There were far too many books for the available space, a common characteristic of local single-venue bookstores. Large or odd-shaped volumes that didn’t fit in proper spaces were stacked on the floor. Upholstered armchairs, which were scattered randomly around the room and presumably meant as places to sit and read, were filled with books.

“I like your shop, Tony. It reminds me of some of the old bookshops in Scotland. And of one in Paris that I like very much, Shakespeare and Company, near Notre-Dame. I worried about it when the fire happened. You would like it, I think.”

Tony nodded. “I do like it. I’ve been there several times. It’s where I learned to organize my inventory. I use the same system they use. Can you tell?”

For the next half hour, the two men talked. Tony learned that the old man was an avid reader with a wide range of interests. They agreed enthusiastically on the virtue of holding printed books over scrolling through digital ones.

“Those damned devices are killing little dinosaurs like me,” Tony lamented.

He learned that Theo had grown up in Portugal and had lived in numerous places across Europe, in Brazil, in New York City, and elsewhere. Theo learned that Tony was a military veteran with strong opinions and limited filters when expressing them. They agreed on the horrors of war.

“And why have you come here of all places?” Tony asked with a tone of mild disbelief.

“I have a bit of business here concerning some properties. I heard from others that this is a nice city with good art, and I have long been

interested in the American South but never had the chance to visit. I've heard some awful things about it, but so far I like all the southerners I've met. I thought it might be nice to try one more town before I go to heaven. So, here I am."

Tony scoffed. "Heaven? My god, you don't believe in that sort of thing do you?"

Theo smiled but did not otherwise respond. Tony, the contrarian, bit his tongue. He could provoke that argument at some future time. For now, the lingering dictates of southern politeness called for restraint.

"How long will you be here?" Tony asked.

"I don't quite know."

"Where are you staying?"

"Well, I'm looking for a place. For now I'm at the hotel down on the river."

"What sort of place you looking for?"

Theo explained his hope for something small, easy to maintain, and convenient to the theater and concert hall. Something furnished. Something he could rent. Price was no issue.

"Let's go outside, and I'll show you one possibility," Tony said.

They returned to the sidewalk. Tony nodded and pointed to a building just a few doors down from the bookshop.

"It's called Ponder House. I don't know if that would work for you, not even sure it's for rent, but the man who owns it has an apartment up there. He fixed it up a few years ago but never found a tenant he trusted.

"He didn't want any college students or young people because he thought they'd make a mess of it. And since it can be kind of noisy down here, especially at night on the weekends, it's not very suitable for older people.

"Plus, you have to walk up three flights of stairs to get to it. I've never been in it, but I bet it's nice. The owner is real old school, got a lot of culture. Ivy League, blue blood, all that. The building's been in his family for generations. That's where his office is. He does a lot of work for some of those old families I was talking about, the history makers."

As Tony spoke, Theo studied Ponder House and assessed the area as a

possible place to live. The charm of Golden was palpable there.

On both sides of the median, the old storefronts, like that of the Chalice — once threatened with demolition — had been rescued, pampered, and groomed into something of their former elegance by citizens intent on protecting the city's historic architecture.

Ponder House was within easy walking distance of all that Theo would need to feed his active mind — art galleries, lecture rooms, bookstore, library, concert venues, theater, and Riverwalk. There was even a touch of Portugal. The Symphony Hall, a custard-yellow edifice visible from Ponder House, reminded Theo of painted facades in Lisbon and Porto.

At the top floor of Ponder House, a small functioning balcony — part of the apartment, no doubt — gave a bird's-eye view of Broadway. A wrought-iron railing, a fleur-de-lis, reminded Theo of European homes he'd known. Since he was used to city sounds, he was not concerned about noise. And even at eighty-six, he was fit and undaunted by the prospect of stairs.

"I don't know if it's for rent," Tony said, "but Mr. Ponder is probably at his office already. If you want me to find out about it, I'll ask him."

“Thank you, Mr. Tony. But I’ll stop in and ask him myself. You have much to do, and I have nothing at all. I’ve already taken too much of your time. Thank you so kindly. Let me pay you for the book and let you get back to other business.”

Theo reached for his wallet.

“No, no. This is my welcome gift to you. Promise you’ll come back for a visit. I want you to tell me more about Portugal and maybe we can argue some about heaven. And if you have any questions about what’s in the book there, you ask me. Me and my staff.”

They shook hands. The radiance of new friendship shone in both faces.

As Theo was turning to leave, Tony noticed and spoke to a young man walking toward them. It was Simone, a student in the music department at Golden University.

“Good morning, Maestro Simone,” Tony said, with a touch of the dramatic. “I can see you haven’t taken my advice yet. I’m telling you, get a guitar.”

The young man, as if by reflex, broke into a smile. This was not the first time he had encountered the bookseller’s banter.

“Simone, I’m telling ya’, get rid of that damn cello. Yo-Yo Ma has the market sewn up. Why you throwing your life away on that thing? Get yourself a guitar. You can make a living with a guitar. I’ve heard of people making literally hundreds of dollars a year playing guitar. Then you’d have some money to buy a book. And you’d at least have a chance of getting yourself a girlfriend. And guitars’re a lot easier to carry, Simone. Look at you. You look like you got a damn hockey player on your back. You’re going to kick yourself someday. I’m tellin’ you.”

As Tony carried on his lecture, the young man shook his head and grinned good-naturedly. He was clearly a veteran, a survivor, of Tony’s horseplay.

Tony continued talking, his hand on Simone’s shoulder. “Mr. Theo, let me introduce you to Simone. He is one of our upstanding university students. A grad student, no less. Here all the way from the state of Washington to study with the famed Professor Gobelli.”

Theo, no longer smiling, tilted his head with obvious interest as Tony continued the introduction. “Yessir, rumor has it that Simone could have gone to San Francisco or Boston or Chicago but only Golden has Gobelli, so here he is, throwing his life away. I’m trying to talk some sense into him, but he won’t listen.”

Theo’s smile returned. He looked into Simone’s eyes. ”I’m Theo. And

I will have to respectfully disagree with Mr. Tony. I have a great love for the cello. Maybe someday you can tell me about yours."

"Thank you. I need all the allies I can get. I'm Simone Lavoie. It's nice to meet you. I wish I had time to visit right now, but I need to get to my class."

"Simone, I'm telling you," Tony chimed back in as the young man walked away, "come back sometime, and let me talk a little sense into you. And buy a book. You gonna miss me when I'm gone. What am I going to do with friends like you? Come in an' buy a book. At the rate I'm going, I'll be closing the doors in a week. Maybe less than a week. Throw the dog a bone, Simone."

Theo surmised that this banter was a regular ritual.

Simone, ten steps away, waved at the two men without turning around and continued on his way to class.

By then, two other men were sitting in wicker chairs beside Tony's. Tony introduced them to Theo, who stepped toward them, bowed slightly, and spoke a greeting.

"Theo, these, my new friend, are the 'senators' I mentioned. They're all retired, and they can't find any friends, so they sit on their asses around here most days. I even had to buy the chairs for them to keep them from lying down on the sidewalk." There were five chairs, including Tony's, under the awning in front of the Verbivore.

"We called this illustrious group 'the Penny Loafers,'" Tony continued with a broad swipe of his arm. "'Penny' because that's more than they spent — combined — on books last year, and 'Loafers' because that's what they all majored in at college — loafing. And my god, look at their shoes. You'd think they're still frat boys from the sixties. When I close up shop and file for bankruptcy, they'll all be homeless."

There were grins on every face as Tony delivered his diatribe. It was apparent the PLs were accustomed to these steady doses of his ragging.

Theo perceived it was all in good humor, grounded in the sort of affection that exists among those who don't take themselves too seriously.

Theo tipped his hat. "Tony, thank you for the introduction. It is nice to meet all of you."

He made the short walk to Ponder House, satisfied it would be a good place to call home if it could be rented.

Already, he had acquaintances, maybe the beginnings of friendship, in the neighborhood.

His plan was working beautifully.

CHAPTER 10

Each weekday morning at seven o'clock, James Ponder pulled into his parking space at the back of Ponder House, entered the building, walked to his second-floor office, and reviewed his calendar for the day (hardly necessary since that was also the last thing he did before leaving his office the previous evening). Then he would retrace his steps, walk a few doors down to the Chalice, purchase a coffee, and return to begin the day's work. He typically had an undisturbed hour or so before his office officially opened at nine. Sometime thereafter, if the weather was agreeable, he would stroll to the post office for a bit of exercise.

He was a pleasant, reserved man who personified discipline and routine. His daily attire was a starched shirt, expensive tie, suit or sport coat, and shined shoes. That meager level of decorum and formality made him an anachronism in the casual, virtual, tech-driven marketplace of Golden. Nonetheless, and despite his outdated ways, Mr. Ponder was a highly regarded and well-connected presence in the community.

He had influence.

His office building, inside and out, was a picture of refinement and order, a stark antithesis to Tony's bookshop. Theo, to his credit, would prove to be as comfortable in one as he was in the other.

Theo stepped beneath the awning and stood before the heavy door, locked at the moment, that led into Ponder House. The door was veneered in oak with a heavy steel frame and two deadbolt locks. A gleaming bronze plate was affixed to the wall beside the entrance. It said:

James Ponder
Broker and Consultant
By Appointment Only

Below it, a smaller historical marker, as shiny as the other, stated the building's name and year of origin, 1845. A brass lamp fixture, also spotless, was mounted beside the door. The brick walls were brushed

and clean.

Theo pressed a button on the call box.

A matter-of-fact female voice, lacking any inkling of welcome, replied. “May I help you?”

Theo leaned close to the speaker. “Yes, good morning. I would like to make an appointment with Mr. Ponder, please.”

“Are you a client?”

“Not yet.”

The voice was about to announce that Mr. Ponder was not accepting new clients when Theo heard someone behind him.

“May I help you, sir?”

Theo turned to see a man, perhaps as old as himself, meticulously attired and holding a handful of mail.

“Good morning, sir,” Theo said. “Yes, I was just trying to make an appointment with Mr. Ponder. I am new to his town and wanted to ask about a piece of property.”

”I’m James Ponder.”

They shook hands. Theo bowed slightly.

“Ah, how nice. It’s good to meet you, Mr. Ponder. Please call me Theo.”

“Mr. Ponder,” the female voice squawked through the speaker. “I was just getting ready to tell the gentleman —”

“It’s OK, Mrs. Gidley. Go ahead and let us in.”

The locks released. Mr. Ponder stepped back to let Theo enter first. The door closed heavily behind them as they stepped into the reception room. In little more than a glance, Theo discerned from the artwork, antiques, topiaries, and rugs that Ponder House was more than a mere office building. Wall hangings were arranged at perfect height and exact right angles, precisely spaced. The tassels of the rug on the pinewood floor were freshly combed. The furnishings suffered no dust, and every item on display — crystal, brass, stone, wood — had been recently polished.

In subsequent visits, Theo would verify that all the artwork, aside from being notably eclectic, was, indeed, original — Cassatt, Thiebaud, Bartlett, Fujimura; that the mahogany display cabinet with the lion’s paw feet was indeed Thomas Chippendale, late eighteenth century; that

the sideboard with satinwood and ebony inlaid checkering was indeed a Hepplewhite; and that the nine-by-twelve rug was indeed a late nineteenth-century Persian Serapi silk. He had no idea about the provenance of the topiary but guessed that it, too, had a distinguished history.

While Theo was doing a quick survey of Ponder's waiting room, Mr. Ponder, in a simultaneous glance, was doing one of his own, postulating from the attire, the wristwatch, the cufflinks, and the scarf that the old man standing before him was no ordinary visitor.

Mr. Ponder instructed his long-time secretary, Mrs. Gidley, to hold his calls.

She looked over her glasses, gave a perfunctory nod to her employer, and glared at Theo. She was offended that he had made it past her guard tower, and she made her disdain obvious through cold, dismissive eyes. Theo offered a demure smile in reply.

Mr. Ponder led the way to a well-lit carpeted staircase. "I have an elevator if you prefer."

"Thank you. I prefer the stairs."

For men with eighty-six and seventy-six years of life respectively, Theo and Mr. Ponder navigated the stairs with an admirable absence of hesitation or strain. At the top they turned into a small hallway, fastidiously maintained and bearing more pieces of art. They entered Mr. Ponder's office, which, like the reception area and hallway, was well adorned and well cared-for.

A wood carving by Grainger McKoy.

A piece of blown glass on a mahogany pedestal.

A triad of millefiori paperweights from Perthshire.

Theo made a mental note: *The man is a connoisseur with an eye for beauty and excellence*.

Conspicuously absent was any evidence of brokerage work or any advertisement of credentials. No diplomas. No certificates of membership in professional organizations. No awards, though Mr. Ponder and his predecessors had amassed many. Aside from a single file folder, an inkwell and pen, a closed laptop, and a calendar, the desktop was empty, polished, and immaculate.

A photograph, family no doubt, was on the credenza beside Mr.

Ponder's desk. And a painting of a reserved, thoughtful, and beautiful middle-aged woman — Theo's assessment of the face in the frame — hung on the wall above the credenza. Mrs. Ponder?

On the east wall of the office, eight-foot windows overlooked Broadway. Curtains and blinds were designed to allow as much or as little light in the room as Mr. Ponder wished. The silence of the room indicated soundproofing that kept street noise from interrupting the serenity of the workspace.

Everything in the office — the furnishings, the artwork, the man himself — exhaled refinement and propriety.

The two men sat at a small table of burled maple. A crystal vase of flowers, gardenias (whose unbruised whiteness suggested they had been put there that very morning), was centered on the table.

"May I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Ponder. I don't want to take too much of your time."

"Mr. Theo, Mrs. Gidley was right in saying I'm not taking new clients. I hope she wasn't too abrupt in telling you so. She's quite protective of our little business. I am somewhat retired, but I still come to the office every day. She's been the guardian angel and sergeant-at-arms of Ponder House for over forty years, almost as long as I've been here."

Theo raised a palm. "No need to apologize. She was simply doing her job, and I understand very well the need to keep people away sometimes. I suppose a place like this needs a guardian angel and a good gendarme."

Mr. Ponder nodded. "You said you wanted to ask me about a piece of property."

"Oh, yes, but before that, Mr. Ponder, please, I'm new to town, and I see that there has been some restoration to the old buildings in this area. I am interested in architecture, and I could not help but notice the ironwork at your entrance. I hope I'm not being rude in asking — and if you're busy right now, please forgive me — but could you tell me about Ponder House? I've rarely seen a nineteenth-century American structure in such impeccable condition."

A light came on in Mr. Ponder's eyes as he leaned back in his chair

and crossed his legs. He did indeed know, in what some considered excruciating detail, about the building's history and design. His attempts to tell that story were usually met with lukewarm interest, or less. Few people had attention spans equal to the length or specificity of Mr. Ponder's narrative about the office property.

"Actually, my morning is quite open. I'm in no hurry at all."

And for the next half hour, with only the tamest of interruptions from Theo, Mr. Ponder spoke of the place with clarity and animation, going all the way back to his ancestors who had laid the first stone. Theo sat up straight, elbows on armrests, chin resting on thumbs, eyes fixed on Mr. Ponder. The more intently Theo focused, the longer and more eagerly Mr. Ponder spoke.

To be clear, Theo's interest was not at all dissembling; he *was* genuinely interested.

"And the brick?" Theo finally interrupted with words rather than nods and facial expressions. "The brick is made of what, local material? I read on one of the historical markers that there used to be a foundry here, near the river, yes?"

The conversation continued. Question. Answer. Exclamation. Pronouncement.

"At some point, Mr. Theo, perhaps I can walk you through the town and tell you some of its history." Theo remembered Tony's remarks about the old families. "Golden has a rich past. But I'm sure every city could say the same. Now, you mentioned some property. What piece do you have in mind?"

Theo looked down at his hands and blushed. "I'm almost afraid to tell you now that I know how much you care for it."

It took a moment for Mr. Ponder to realize what Theo meant. "Ponder House?"

"Please let me explain. You see, I'm looking for a place to live for a few months, something to rent, and I was told you might have a space at the top of your building. If that's true, I would be very interested."

Mr. Ponder shifted in his chair. "Oh, that. Yes, well, Mr. Theo, I do have an apartment, but I've never leased it. I don't think I'm interested in that. I'm terribly sorry, and I would be happy to help you find a suitable place."

Theo's face could not hide his disappointment. "Of course. I certainly understand."

Mr. Ponder thought for a moment. "How long do you think you'll be here?"

"I'm not certain but I would guess a few months. Maybe six or seven."

"And you're alone?"

"Yes, I am a widower. My wife died many years ago."

"No pets."

Theo smiled. "No pets. It has been my habit to feed birds in the park, but they never follow me home."

"And, Mr. Theo, forgive me. I don't think I asked you why you're here in Golden."

"I have some business concerns, some properties to take care of." It was a curiously vague answer, but Mr. Ponder did not ask for details. Not yet anyway. At the moment, he was contemplating a new possibility. He spoke with the hesitancy of a man weighing his options.

"I don't know that I will rent the apartment, but if I did, would you be able to walk up three flights of stairs? The entrance to the apartment is a metal stairway in the back. And to get to the stairs, you have to unlock a gate. It's rather inconvenient."

Theo, not one to be dissuaded, answered confidently. "I have a great fondness for walking. And I like stairs."

"It can be pretty noisy down here, especially on weekends, with all the college students and nightlife. Would that be a problem?"

"Perhaps. But not likely. My home in New York has lots of stairs and lots of noise. I might actually find a bit of noise easier to adjust to than total quiet. But Mr. Ponder," Theo held up an open hand as if to stop further discussion, "I don't want to impose, and I can tell you have a great affection for this beautiful place. Forgive me for putting you in an awkward position. I withdraw my inquiry and will find a place nearby. Maybe you could give me a recommendation. But I do wish for a walking tour of the city sometime soon. Now, one final question: Your sign says you are a broker and consultant. I know what a broker is. But how do you describe your work as a consultant?"

Mr. Ponder's voice modulated into a business tone. He explained his

work as a dispenser of advice, keeper of secrets, agent of calm, and incubator of ideas.

“Sometimes consulting is a matter of a single meeting; other times it might involve long, complicated transactions. They all tend to be very specific, very case by case.”

Theo nodded. “So, is a consultant like a priest or a lawyer? Sworn to secrecy?”

“It depends on the consultant, I suppose. There is no licensing or ethical board for consultants, but if a consultant lacks basic discretion, he or she won’t be in business for long. We often deal with very sensitive information, some of it financial, some of it personal, some of it family related. A good consultant has to be entirely trustworthy and, in my opinion, yes, sworn to secrecy. To me, that’s a cardinal tenet of the profession.”

Theo nodded. “Very good. I might need a consultant while I’m here in your town. If you’re not taking new clients, maybe you could refer me to someone. I certainly don’t want to anger the sergeant-at-arms.” Theo raised his eyebrows, nodded toward the downstairs, and smiled. “No new clients, right?”

“Yes, well . . .” Mr. Ponder was clearly intrigued by Theo and wondered what his story might be. He also had a nagging sense, inexplicable, that this meeting might not be as accidental as it appeared.

Theo stood to leave. The ease with which he rose to his feet and straightened his frame belied his years. His vigor was obvious.

“Mr. Theo, would you like to take a look at the upstairs?”

“Please, Mr. Ponder, I’ve already taken far too much of your time. I’m afraid that if I see the flat, it will be as beautiful as your office and then I will become a nuisance who cannot take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Now, now.” Mr. Ponder swatted Theo’s objection away with a wave of his hand. “Let me show it to you.”

As they left the office, Theo pointed to the portrait behind Mr. Ponder’s desk. It bore the same qualities as the pencil portraits that hung on the walls of the Chalice. “This is the work of a master, whoever it is.”

Mr. Ponder nodded. “I agree. The artist is a local fellow. Asher

Glissen. His family's been in this community for generations. The first time my wife saw this, she cried."

They walked down the hallway to a locked door. Mr. Ponder entered a code on a keypad and pushed it open. The casing of the door, like that on the entrance downstairs, was thick gauged, obviously installed with imperviousness in mind.

"When I renovated the upstairs as an apartment, I made sure that my office was secure from any risk of intrusion. Over the years, we've put in firewalls, motion detectors, and other security, out of concern for my clients as much as anything. One of the reasons I've been reluctant to rent upstairs is my fear of bad tenants. My clients wouldn't want just anyone living here."

The two men climbed the stairs — unadorned and lacking any attempts at elegance — until they reached another heavy door that required another keycode. The door opened into a furnished sitting room.

Mr. Ponder said, "Let's start at the entrance." He led Theo to the rear of the building, the west end. There were windows enough for ample sunlight to fill the room but, at the moment, they were covered with drapes and shades.

Even in the dim light, Theo could see that the apartment, though more modestly decorated than Mr. Ponder's office, was far too nice for any college students he had ever known. In fact, there were not many adults to whom he would entrust such a residence.

Mr. Ponder unlocked the deadbolts and opened the door. He and Theo stepped out onto the landing. A panoramic view, worthy of a postcard, greeted them. Theo whistled softly in admiration and whispered, "What a glorious sight."

Mr. Ponder nodded his agreement before looking down at the wrought-iron staircase. He said, "It *is* a nice view, but it takes forty-five steps to get here. That's a lot of climbing."

Theo nodded. "Yes, but that is a small price to pay for a sight like this."

They went back inside.

Upon entry, they stepped into a small mudroom, an area which was not actually a room nor a place that had ever suffered the indignity of

southern mud. From there, one stepped into a comfortable apartment: two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a spacious dining room and sitting area combined. Heart pine floors, the deep gold of spilled honey, were tastefully covered with oriental rugs and runners. High ceilings and tall, ample windows gave a sense of spaciousness to the premises. One with an appreciation of light and shadow, one with a love for the subtle changes that occur to a room as sun rays move from surface to surface — one like Theo — would find no end to the visual pleasure of such a place.

He shook his head and tsked three times. "Mr. Ponder, I am afraid I shall be a terrible nuisance now that I have seen it."

Mr. Ponder was pleased by Theo's favorable opinion of the residence.

But he was, at the same time, a man of caution. He was mindful that this genteel old man with the accent and affable disposition had been a total stranger little more than an hour ago and remained, for now, an unconfirmed inquirer off the street.

Mr. Ponder had encountered no small number of eloquent swindlers and charming charlatans during his days as a broker and consultant to the wealthy. He had sometimes saved his clients from the grasp of ne'er-do-wells before damage could be inflicted. At other times, he helped clients pick up the wreckage of their misplaced trust. And yet, something about Theo felt unassailable.

The cautious Mr. Ponder surprised even himself when he said, "Mr. Theo, I'd like a couple of days to think this over, but maybe we can work something out. And perhaps you'd like to think it over, too, especially those forty-five steps. They can be a real slog in summertime."

Theo nodded and smiled. *Who uses the word "slog" in America*?

Mr. Ponder continued, choosing his words carefully. "I would make one request that I hope won't offend you. This has been a most unexpected meeting, and very pleasant, but we are still strangers. I owe it to my clients to know who I might be renting the apartment to. Could you provide me with a list of references, or letters of reference, so I can do a bit of due diligence?"

Theo nodded. "I fully understand, and I would want as much myself. I will gladly give you some numbers to call. But if you have a few more

minutes, and if you will assure me that our conversation is confidential, I would like to tell you a bit of my story. Perhaps that will save you some trouble. If not, then I will bother you no more."

They sat once again in Mr. Ponder's office. As Theo spoke, the consultant sat in rapt attention. And then there were questions. Lots of questions.

Almost two hours later, Theo and Mr. Ponder rose and walked downstairs. They shook hands.

Theo was now tenant, client, neighbor, and confider to James Ponder.

Theo bowed to Mrs. Gidley on the way out and wished her a nice afternoon. She was not smiling.

Later that day, Mrs. Gidley walked to the second floor.

"Mr. Ponder," even after forty years, she addressed him formally, "I thought we weren't taking any new clients."

He knew by the tone of her voice that she was displeased. Before he could respond, she spoke her mind.

"Mr. Ponder, I mean, I know the decision is yours, but there's something about the man I don't like. I'm not sure I trust him. I don't know why, but I just don't. He just seems a little too nice and a little too slick, if you ask me. That's my first impression of him. And we already have as much work as either of us wants."

Mr. Ponder was polite but firm in his reply. "Anita, I know this is unusual, but I've already done some checking and made some phone calls, and I'm comfortable taking him on as a client. I'm not going to be able to tell you an awful lot about him. You know how our profession works. This is one of those times I'll have to be very guarded. But for now, just do what I tell you."

There was a decidedness in his voice that squelched any reply. Her face went pale, her lips closed, and her nostrils flared.

"Anita," he tried to look her in the eyes but they were fixated on a pen in her hands, "please, trust me."

She resisted the impulse to argue.

"Well, if he's going to be such a secret, do you even want me to open a file on him?"

"Yes, let's do that, but it might be empty for a while. I'll be doing a lot of the initial paperwork and transactional work myself."

“What name do I put on the file?”

“Theo.”

She waited for him to say more. When he didn’t, she prodded. “Theo who?”

“For now, just put Theo.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Yes. Call our cleaning service, and have them do a deep clean of the apartment. Mr. Theo will be moving in soon.”

Her mouth dropped open, but she did not speak. Her face was a mixture of disbelief and mild horror. What was the cautious Mr. Ponder getting himself into?

“Yes, sir.” She turned to leave the room.

The guardian angel of Ponder House was not happy.

CHAPTER 11

Theo and Mr. Ponder met several times in the days following their introduction. On each occasion, Mrs. Gidley greeted the mysterious old man with the same frown and the same cold, dismissive eyes that she had displayed at their first encounter.

***You old snake. Who are you*?**

As Mr. Ponder's tenant, Theo was asked to honor a small number of reasonable requests: proper upkeep of the premises, immediate notification concerning problems or appliance malfunctions, cautious use of the balcony (and, particularly, no children; the original railing, still in place, was eighteen inches below present-day safety code), no smoking, discretion concerning houseguests, and entrance through the back stairs only. Mr. Ponder would provide a cleaning service, if needed, once a week or at whatever interval Theo felt necessary. He could also have groceries delivered to the apartment, if Theo wished, so he would not have to carry heavy items up the stairs. Theo paid six months' rent, insisted on doing so, "so you can't throw me out on the street."

Theo moved in on a Tuesday morning. A cab drove him to the rear of Ponder House, and the old man, refusing the cabbie's offer to carry his bags, heaved two large suitcases, one at a time, up the three flights of stairs. It was a workout. He unpacked, mostly clothes, books, and papers. Then he went to a small market on Broadway and bought several items of food and bottles of wine. *The less food in the kitchen*, he thought, *the more I'll get out, the more I'll see, and the better off I'll be*.

As Mr. Ponder's client, Theo provided him with appropriate bits of personal information, including the names of contacts and significant business associates in case of an emergency. "I'm an old man; you never know."

He also deposited a hundred thousand dollars to be held in trust and used by Mr. Ponder for expenses and costs that might arise.

Theo also explained his plan concerning the portraits at the Chalice. "I want to purchase them all, a few at a time, and give them to their

rightful owners. I will meet them at the fountain, but I will need help getting their addresses and scheduling the meetings."

Mr. Ponder was intrigued and considerably mystified by the idea. He had questions and words of caution for Theo. He even offered an alternative proposal.

"If you'd like, we could buy all of them at once and let the artist or the coffee shop people deliver them. That would be a lot easier and quicker."

Theo flatly rejected the suggestion. "No, no. I want to give them myself. It is very important I do it this way. I will give them one at a time."

He gave Mr. Ponder a list with three names on it. He had already purchased the portraits and was eager to make the bestowals.

As Mr. Ponder's neighbor, Theo settled into an almost-daily routine of slow walks along and around Broadway. On one such walk shortly after leasing the apartment at Ponder House, he stopped by the Verbivore to thank Tony for the referral. And he promised to buy books regularly.

"Well, praise the Lord!" Tony raised a hand and shook it like an old woman at a tent revival. He turned to the three PLs sitting there. "Somebody take a damn picture! Finally! A paying customer. Theo, maybe you'll rub off on somebody. I sure hope so. At the rate I'm going, I'll be closed at the end of the month."

Theo delivered a folder of documents to Mr. Ponder, consultant and confidant, for safekeeping. He would add others in the future, but for now he was comfortable with his arrangement and thankful.

CHAPTER 12

In her first official act of employment for Theo, Mrs. Gidley (at Mr. Ponder's direction) found the addresses of three local residents and mailed Theo's handwritten letters to them. She also began a log (again at Mr. Ponder's direction) to ensure that the letters reached their intended destinations in a timely manner. Addresses were sometimes difficult and time consuming to obtain, and the somewhat demeaning task did nothing to elevate Theo's place in Mrs. Gidley's mind.

Still, she did the work, did it well, and was paid handsomely in return.

***Why on earth is this old man giving away free portraits*? She wondered. *Very suspicious*.**

She did have to admit, however, that she had never seen such beautiful handwriting before. Not exactly the penmanship of a con man, but one never knew.

Theo's second, third, and fourth recipients all showed up at the fountain on time, talkative, curious, and appreciative of what the gentle old man was doing.

Bestowal number two was Junior Perryman, a mixologist at the Bowleg Bar and Grill. Years earlier, in a previous career, Junior had lost an arm in an accident at a local textile mill. In his portrait, a prominent scar from the same accident was visible over his left eye, and his nose was slightly misaligned.

He was on his way to work (his shift began at eight) when he strolled up to the fountain, introduced himself to Theo, sat down, and entered into friendly, unhurried conversation, not terribly different than the thousands he'd had over the years while serving whiskey and beer at the Bowleg. Junior personified the gift of gab.

"Some people call me a bartender, but I'm really a therapist, like Dr. Phil or something. You'd be amazed at some of the stories I hear. I just mix up drinks to make the medicine go down. You probably wonder how I mix a drink with only one arm, don't you?"

The question *had* crossed Theo's mind.

"Well, you'll just have to come down sometime, and I'll show you how it's done. I'll mix you one of my specials."

Junior pointed to the fountain. "Mr. Theo, you might already know this, but this fountain is called the Fedder. You want to know how it got its name?"

"Yes, thank you, please tell me."

"OK. Well, a long time ago, like in the 1880s, they had a big dedication ceremony when the fountain was built."

Theo's eyes studied the impressive structure in front of them. It reminded him of the Bethesda Fountain in New York's Central Park. That one, too, featured an angel with open wings.

"A preacher was saying a prayer, and there was a little kid on the platform — I think it was the mayor's grandson. While the prayer was going on, a pigeon flew off the statue, and a feather fell onto the preacher's robe. So the little kid hollered, 'Papa, look a peeth a fedder fell off the angel.' He said 'peeth a fedder,' but he meant 'piece of feather.' That ended up in the newspaper, and everybody started calling the fountain the 'Peeth a Fedder,' but now it's just called 'the Fedder.' Sometimes for fun at work, I'll bet a free beer to anyone who can say 'piece of feather' five times real fast without messing up. It's hard enough sober, but a few beers make it near 'bout impossible."

Junior nodded toward the fountain and chuckled. "I've had to pull some of my customers out of that water before."

It was approaching eight o'clock when Theo finally uncovered the portrait and handed it to Junior.

"Mr. Junior, when I saw this face, I had a feeling this was a special man, a wise and good man. Now I know. And a good storyteller as well. I'm very glad I get to be in the world with you."

Junior took the portrait in his hand.

"Thank you. So, you're just going to give this to me?" He spoke as one who expected to be asked for something in return.

Theo bowed his head and put a hand over his heart. "It is my honor.

Thank you for letting me do this."

Junior studied the drawing closely. "That guy is pretty amazing, isn't he? The artist."

“He is indeed. Do you know Mr. Glissen?”

Junior shook his head. “Naw, he’s not the Bowleg sort, I don’t think.”

They talked until it was time for Junior to report to duty.

“Well, Mr. Theo, I better head to work. Thank you again for the nice picture. I think I’ll give it to my mama. Come down some night, and I’ll mix you one of my specials. On the house. And when you’re by yourself, try it sometime. Piece of feather. Real fast, five times.”

Bun Everson, the third beneficiary of Theo’s inspired idea, arrived with a friend, Sara. They were both students at the University of Golden. Bun (short for “Abundance,” her grandmother’s name) was enrolled in the graphic design program. Sara was majoring in English with an emphasis in creative writing. (It was she who had written the article about Asher in the *Gold Standard*.)

“We want to start a magazine together when we graduate,” Bun said.

Theo was a flurry of questions. The two girls were a flurry of half-formed answers and fully formed dreams.

He handed the wrapped package to Bun. She opened it and, with Sara’s head almost touching hers, stared at it without comment. They had previously seen the portrait on the Chalice wall and had both been mystified when, one day, it was no longer on display.

Sara said, “I’ve been saving money to buy it for Bun’s parents, but, you know, I’m just a poor college kid. Bun and I both love Mr. Glissen’s work. We had a nice conversation with him when he took our pictures.”

“When he took my picture, he took Sara’s too,” Bun said. “I hope he draws her.”

Theo laughed. “In other words, we might meet here again someday?”

In fact, they did, just a few months later.

Much later, the magazine launched. One of the first articles was about a day when two college students met an old man named Theo.

Bestowal four went to Frankie Knowles. The splayed eyes and crooked mouth did not diminish the brightness of the twelve-year-old’s smile.

When Theo had first told Mr. Ponder about the idea of giving portraits away, Mr. Ponder had offered two strong warnings: Never write a letter directly to a child, and always be careful about giving

portraits to women, young women in particular. He assumed Theo would exercise such discretion without being told to do so, but he also knew, from years of undoing smart people's fiascos, that it never hurt to state the obvious.

"Either of those can be easily misunderstood and might possibly get you in trouble these days. If you want to give a picture to a child or teenager, write to the parents, and let them decide if they want to accept your offer. And don't be surprised if the parents show up alone."

It had crossed Theo's mind not to give portraits to children at all, especially so early on, but Frankie Knowles's framed face argued to the contrary.

The boy arrived with his father and mother.

They had been to the Chalice only once in their lives — four-dollar coffee was beyond the reach of their meager income — and they were not even aware that Frankie's picture had been placed on the wall.

When they received the letter inviting them to the Fedder, they were somewhat suspicious and ill at ease. But they lived nearby, in one of Golden's not-so-elegant neighborhoods, and reasoned that, if nothing else, Frankie would enjoy the stroll and benefit from being outdoors. Fresh air was good medicine for a child confined to a wheelchair.

After introductions — Theo holding both of Frankie's hands in his — the wheelchair was parked a couple of feet in front of the bench, so that the old man and the little boy were knee to knee, facing one another. They carried on like old friends for half an hour while Mr. and Mrs. Knowles sat quietly. All the while, Theo's focus held fast on Frankie's face and eyes.

In response to one of Theo's questions, the boy said, "My favorite sport is NASCAR."

Theo knew little about race cars, other than what he had learned at the famed competition in Monte Carlo one year, but he was amused by Frankie's enthusiasm for the sport. Perhaps confinement to a wheelchair made speed a tantalizing possibility and an understandable fantasy for the young boy.

When Frankie peeled the wrapping paper from his portrait, his mother, who had stood to help him, fanned her face with one hand and put the other on her heart. Her mouth fell open, speechless. Frankie's

father was just as spellbound but less demonstrative. He too stood, shook his head, grinned, and patted his son's shoulder. A short silence, during which all eyes were fixed on the gift, was followed by generous thanks, hugs, laughter.

Theo never saw the Knowles family again. But they spoke of him often and never missed an opportunity to tell others the story of the "genuine portrait that this old man gave us for free at the Fedder."

The idea was off and running.

A restless accountant.

A gregarious bartender.

An aspiring entrepreneur.

A NASCAR fan.

At least eighty-eight to go.

Theo had struck a motherlode of opportunity. He had stumbled onto his purpose as the newest resident of Golden.

CHAPTER 13

When town planners designed Golden in the early nineteenth century, they had either had the foresight, the intuition, or the dumb luck to make the median wider than what was in vogue at the time. One of the planners had been to Europe — an extravagance in the early 1800s — and had witnessed some of the wide boulevards in the old cities there (the Champs-Élysées in Paris, La Rambla in Barcelona, the Via Monte Napoleone in Milan).

It was his suggestion, the story goes, that the space between the east and west sides of Broadway be ample enough to accommodate large canopy trees, fountains, open areas for play, and landscapable greenspace. The wisdom or fortuitousness of that decision had served the city well.

Early on, and largely at the instigation of the town planner who had been to Paris, the median became known as "the Promenade."

Last syllable, "nod."

And like the rest of the city, the Promenade experienced its share of economic ups and downs over the years.

When the city's financial coffers were low, that fact was visible in the dereliction of plants and landmarks in the median. When, on the other hand, the local treasury had been flush and the downtown was thriving, well-paid arborists and landscapers maintained order and comeliness up and down the thoroughfare. A safe, clean, beautiful Promenade always proved good for business and public relations.

In Golden's most recent renaissance, the one that preceded Theo's arrival, the city had campaigned aggressively to undo the neglect of previous years. Litter, untended vegetation, cracked sidewalks, malfunctioning fountains, neglected storefronts, and algae-covered pools became the target of thorough, well-funded reclamation. The makeover brought new landscaping, street paving, fresh paint, tasteful signage, and a maintenance crew that worked daily to keep the area in good repair.

And the public, to the delight of local leaders and business owners,

responded with wallets open wide.

Theo's knowledge of Golden grew by the day. Through walks and conversation, observation and inquiry, he learned the lore and landmarks of the city. Historical markers told the stories of buildings, bridges, prominent citizens, and local industry. And there were always people like Tony and Junior to fill in the gaps.

The city, as Mr. Ponder had promised, had a rich past.

Theo did read the book Tony gave him at their first meeting. It was there he learned about the oak trees in the Promenade, one in particular. Those trees were, and ever would be, haunting reminders of grim moments and dark stains in Golden's history.

The oak nearest the Chalice, on the southeast side of the tree, had a scar on its trunk, eight feet above the ground, that bore the unmistakable shape of an eye.

Some of the older Black folk in the city called it "the Eye of God."

It harkened back to a time, still alive in their ancient memories, when public executions took place in the median, and hangings — unspeakable injustices — were carried out on the strong limbs of those trees. Crowds came shamelessly, in the broad light of day, to witness and even celebrate those lynchings.

One old soul, who had actually been alive to witness such barbarism, once offered her belief about the tree in an interview with the local evening news.

"God sees. The Eye o' God sees. The Lawd God sees it all. He keepin' sco'. That's why the grass don't grow up under dem trees."

And they swear that, at times, the Eye of God weeps. Others say it's just rainwater and tannin. But those old timers brook no dissent.

"No, chile, dem is the tears o' God. Put some o' dat on ya' tongue. It's all bitter. Bitter, hurtful tears. He cries some ever'day. Every day this world give Him reason, us too, to cry some mo'. The eyes of God in the Promenod. 'Dey sees it all. But He gawn make it right one day."

The Promenade, the Fedder, and a carefully selected spot beside the river: those three places became, in many ways, the center of Theo's life in Golden. For the year he dwelled there, the Eye of God was always near.

CHAPTER 14

Mr. Ponder handed Mrs. Gidley a list of four more names. She ever so slightly rolled her eyes.

"Mr. Ponder, you have to admit. This is ridiculous and dangerous, approaching total strangers like this. One of these days a policeman or an angry husband is going to show up, and we're going to be stuck right in the middle of it."

The venerable consultant did not argue.

"Anita, I'll admit it's unusual. But I'm proofing all of his letters to make sure they're appropriate. And seven o'clock in broad daylight keeps him pretty safe."

And so, bestowal number five.

Intuition and appearance ("faces that have suffered loss") eventually led Theo to the portrait of Kendrick Whitaker.

Theo learned from Shep that the young man worked as a custodian at the university. It was a job for which he was grateful, in which he took pride, and to which he brought an admirable combination of punctuality, diligence, and excellence. Working night shift meant he was invisible to most of those who benefited from his work (he usually left before they arrived at their jobs), but his efforts were noticed, admired, and appreciated.

He had a serious, quiet demeanor that could easily be, and sometimes was, mistaken for sullenness. Beneath the exterior, however, for those able to pierce it, he was a thoughtful and gentle man.

Kendrick rarely patronized the Chalice (there was free coffee at work, after all), but when he did, he said little, rarely smiled, and always ordered a medium brew of the day with room for cream.

Mrs. Gidley sent Theo's handwritten letter through the university's custodial department.

Dear Mr. Whitaker,

You and I have never met in person but I saw your portrait recently at the Chalice coffee shop. I bought the portrait and would like to give it

to you as a gift. You can do with it as you please.

I understand you work at the university on the night shift, on weekdays.

I would like to meet you at the fountain in the median across from the coffee shop to give you the picture. I will be there at 7:30 this Thursday morning. It should only take a few minutes.

I know this might seem a bit strange. For some reason, I feel that the picture should be with you. If you wish not to have it, I will take good care of it.

I look forward to meeting you.

Just so you'll be able to recognize me. I am an old man. I will be wearing a brown jacket and a green cap.

Wishing you the very best.

Every blessing,
Theo

At seven a.m. on Thursday, Theo was sitting at the fountain. The spouts were idle, and the water was calm enough that coins were distinguishable beneath the surface. One red plastic cup, a souvenir from the previous night's reveling, floated lazily on its side.

To the east, thin, gilded strands of melon-pink clouds highlighted the horizon above buildings along Broadway. Theo imagined flamingoes in repose. He sat facing west with a view of the university administration offices. The town was waking up. The Chalice, no doubt, was already pouring generous amounts of coffee.

Theo looked up and studied the stately old oaks near the fountain.

He pondered how a trunk could become so gnarled. It must have taken a great force to torque such a massive object. Or had some small force early in the tree's life dictated its course of growth?

***You can bend a twig, but not a tree*.**

Theo tried to imagine how an artist might draw this particular trunk. It has the look of a twisted towel. Or perhaps a human neck caught mid-scream, muscle and veins taut and protruding. Yes, the old oak is a permanent scream, a memorial to some horror it might have witnessed long ago. It would take a skilled artist to capture the soul of such a tree.

Theo looked higher up at the branches. They too provoked questions. *Was their symmetry achieved by design, the work of an arborist, or was it purely the result of nature? How did they find water in the midst of so much pavement*?

A passerby could not have imagined the traffic of ideas filling the old man's mind as he waited for Kendrick Whitaker to appear. The portrait was beside Theo on the bench. His hands, fingers laced together, rested in his lap. He glanced from time to time over his shoulder at the large clock on a church spire, barely visible through the buildings of east Broadway. He was mildly nervous, just as he had been for the prior meetings.

At seven thirty, Kendrick had not appeared. By seven forty, no one. By seven forty-five, Theo wondered how long he should wait. He began to think of reasons why Kendrick might not be able to show. *Sickness? Maybe he didn't work last night. Maybe he had to work a bit later than usual. Was the letter not delivered? No, any reason but that.* Mr. Ponder had assured him it would make it into the hands of Kendrick's supervisor and eventually to Kendrick himself.

***I will wait until eight o'clock*.**

And then there he was, rounding the corner of Light Street and Broadway.

Theo remained seated until Kendrick was just a few yards away. At that point, he stood, smiled, removed his hat, and bowed. The young man, head slightly down and hands in his pockets, stepped toward him. Theo held out his hand. Kendrick looked at it and paused before realizing it was the offer of a handshake, which he awkwardly accepted.

An hour earlier, Kendrick had stood at a window in the university admin building, looking down at the old man. The absurdity of Theo's letter, the disquieting thought of having been stalked by a stranger who only gave his first name, and the probability that this was all a hustle or scam had driven Kendrick to the sensible decision not to accept the invitation. But he had walked to the window a second time and then a third, vacillating between fear and fascination, from skepticism to curiosity.

"Maybe I'll go."

He was tired. He was eager to get to the hospital. And so, seven thirty had come and gone.

And seven forty.

And quarter till.

Kendrick had clocked out of work at his regular quitting time but remained at the window in the admin building to study the solitary figure at the fountain. A frailty or a sadness or something else about Theo softened Kendrick's apprehension. He left the building and crossed Broadway as the nearby church bells chimed eight times.

He approached Theo cautiously, looking in every direction to ensure that no one else was party to the unusual meeting.

"You are Mr. Kendrick," Theo said.

It was part question, part declaration. The young man nodded at the old man and then looked away.

There was a brief uncomfortable silence before Theo filled the vacuum.

“Mr. Kendrick, I know you must be tired after working all night, but thank you for meeting me here.”

Kendrick nodded, but only glanced at Theo from the corner of his eye. He caught the accent in the old man’s speech. That fact increased, by a couple of degrees, the oddity of the already-odd encounter. But Kendrick’s uneasiness was somewhat tempered by the gentleness of the voice and the slight bow that Theo maintained as he spoke, as if the young man were someone worthy of respect. Kendrick continued looking away, his head tilted slightly with one ear turned toward Theo. Morning traffic and street sounds competed with the old man’s voice.

Theo took note of the young man’s features. Medium height. Strong build. Prominent eyes, restless. Small mustache. Strong hands. One tattoo on neck: “Scooby.” Work clothes, pressed and clean. Nervous.

“Mr. Kendrick, I wasn’t sure you would come this morning. If I had been you,” there was a tone of teasing in Theo’s voice, “I think I might have stood at that window in the administration building and spied a bit before coming down to meet an old man with only a first name.”

Smiling boyishly, Theo pointed to the admin building, second floor, to the very window from which Kendrick had studied him minutes earlier. Obviously, Theo had not only been looking at branches when he had tilted his head back to gaze at the oak trees. “If I had seen an old man like me sitting at the fountain, I don’t think I would have come.”

Embarrassed and rattled that he’d been spied on while spying, Kendrick did not return Theo’s smile. If anything, he felt even more nervous. Theo regretted his ill-timed attempt at humor. His tone became serious.

“But Mr. Kendrick, thank you. I’m glad you’re here.”

The young man’s eyes blinked and narrowed. Should he smile or walk away? Another quick glance gave him some assurance that this Mr. Theo was addled at worst, sane and sincere at best. Kendrick remained silent and wary.

“Well, here’s your portrait.” Theo picked up the wrapped rectangle

and held it out to Kendrick. “Thank you for letting me give it to you.”

“I can’t pay you for this.”

“Nor would I take it if you could, Mr. Kendrick. This is a gift. It has been in the Chalice for weeks now, but it belongs with you, or with someone you love. Please, I think you’ll like it very much.”

Kendrick said nothing, still uncertain of Theo’s intent or the meaning of the moment. He reached out reluctantly and then, as if having touched a live wire, took a step backward.

His eyes widened, and he dropped his hands, both curled into fists, to his sides. He had learned from the streets and had been told as a boy by his grandmother never to take a bag or a box or a bottle from someone without first knowing with total certainty what was in it. The wrapped item that Theo had offered him was suddenly sinister, as welcome as a venomous snake. Kendrick’s face became tense and cautious, his body defensive. He stared at the object in Theo’s hand as if it were a mad dog on a tight chain. Then his eyes darted in every direction. He finally looked back at the befuddled old man.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?”

Kendrick would later wonder why he did not run away at that moment.

Theo’s smile vanished, replaced by a look of utter confusion. Until that moment, it had never occurred to him that a wrapped package might evoke suspicion or have the appearance of a sting or entrapment. Kendrick knew about such things.

Theo hastened to put the young man’s mind at ease. “No, no. You misunderstand. Please. Look.”

Theo peeled back the plain brown paper as quickly as he could, then held up the portrait in both hands.

The young man looked hard at the picture, only once taking a glance around to be assured of his safety. His hands gradually relaxed, his eyes focused, and, without knowing he’d done it, he took a step toward Theo.

Kendrick had seen the portrait once, from across the room at the Chalice. He had been struck by the likeness the face bore to his own, but he could not imagine it was really him being taken seriously by a real artist. He had never gotten near enough in the Chalice to conclude

that it was, indeed, himself.

He *did* remember someone taking a photograph of him in the coffee shop one day. It had made him uncomfortable, and he did not fully understand what the purpose was.

But now, up close, he could see that someone had taken great effort and given painstaking attention to every detail, every line, every shadow in his face. Someone had deemed him worthy of their time. Worthy enough to be matted, under glass, and framed.

Theo gushed with apology. "Mr. Kendrick, please, please forgive me.

I didn't mean to alarm you."

Kendrick nodded.

Theo asked, "Have you seen this before?"

"I'm not sure."

The frown and the furrows receded from Kendrick's face. He leaned forward and gazed at the portrait cradled in the crook of Theo's arm. His eyes were bright with wonderment. He remained silent, as did Theo, for a matter of seconds.

Kendrick studied the drawing.

Theo studied Kendrick.

"It's yours if you'd like it, Mr. Kendrick. I assure you, I mean no harm. It is simply a gift."

Kendrick received it delicately. His head bobbed as if to exhale words that were stuck in his throat.

Theo broke the silence. "You like it, yes?"

Kendrick nodded. He finally looked at Theo. "Why are you doin' this? Who are you? How do you know me?" Theo returned his gaze, soft eyes above a closed smile.

"Mr. Kendrick, I'm an old man with a long story. And I don't know anything about you except the portrait. I moved here recently and saw your picture at the coffee shop one day." Theo nodded toward the Chalice. "I saw all the portraits there and was told they were for sale. I don't know where the idea came from —maybe heaven? — but I wanted you to have your portrait. In fact, I hope to give all of them away. So, I bought yours — did you know your name is on the back? — and I wrote you the letter and, well, here we stand."

Kendrick listened intently. His countenance, while relaxed, still tilted

toward apprehension.

“Mr. Kendrick, do you know the saying, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’?”

Kendrick nodded. His grandmother had quoted that scripture verse to him many times.

Theo leaned in. “I tell you, it’s true.”

Kendrick’s eyes were fixed on the portrait. Finally, he spoke “I’m gonna give it to my baby. I’m on my way to see her right now.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“No, sir. My baby. My little girl.”

With those words, “my little girl,” sweetness overcame any lingering distrust that Kendrick might have felt toward the old man. He smiled, eyes and mouth, at the prospect of giving such a gift to his daughter. “Today’s her birthday.”

“Maravilhoso!” Theo gestured dramatically, both hands shoulder high, palms open and upward. “How old?”

“Eight years old today. I’m going to the hospital to see her right now. The bus’ll be here in just a few minutes.”

Kendrick pointed to a nearby corner, where public transport collected passengers. A small knot of people was huddled at the pick-up point.

Theo’s smile disappeared and his expression changed from one of celebration to concern.

“I hope she’s OK, your daughter. She’s in the hospital? I don’t mean to be impolite, but is she alright?”

“She got hurt real bad in a wreck. Her mama died, and she been in and out of the hospital since it happened. Her leg isn’t healing right, so they had to do another surgery.”

Theo stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing steadily at the young father.

“I work night shift and stay with her in the daytime. My grandmama works day shift and stays with her at night. My grandmama is sick, too; she’s got ‘sugar,’ but she loves that little girl.”

“Sugar,” Theo found out later, was diabetes.

“Who is the doctor at the hospital?”

Kendrick shook his head. “I have a hard time sayin’ his name. He’s

not from here, so I just call him 'doctor.' And they change her doctors a lot, so there might be a new one when I go up today. I hope not. But I gotta take what they give me."

"What is her name, your daughter?"

"Lamisha. But I call her Scooby. She likes to draw." Kendrick looked closely at his portrait. "Uh, uh, uh. She is gonna love this. He did this with pencils or what?"

"Pencils. It's amazing, isn't it? It looks just like you."

"Shoot, it looks more like me than I do." Kendrick smiled, even laughed a little. "Well, it can't look more like me than I do, but it's something' else."

"Mr. Kendrick, I tell you what I saw when I first looked at your picture. I thought, 'This is a strong man.' I could see worry and some hurt in the eyes, but still, I said to myself, there is kindness in this face. And now I know it is the face of a good father." Theo nodded toward the frame. "Yes, I could tell, this is the face of a man who can do much good in the world. The artist captured it all so clearly. Mr. Kendrick. I'm honored to meet you."

Again, not knowing how to respond, Kendrick simply nodded. He was not used to being praised, especially by those so unlike him, but he didn't feel that the old man was being patronizing or insincere. He was relieved to see the bus approaching. "There's my ride. It only comes once a hour, so I gotta go. Yes, sir, my little girl is gonna love this." He held the portrait up with both hands. "Now, what's your name again? Mr. Theo? Am I sayin' that right? Theo?"

"That's perfect!"

"Well, thank you for the picture. That's really nice. Thank you."

Kendrick turned and hurried toward the bus stop, a mixed gait of walking and jogging, as Theo stood at the fountain with his hands behind his back, leaning slightly toward the water.

Kendrick boarded the bus, cradling the picture to his chest. He took a seat beside a window. From there as the bus pulled away, he could see the old man standing at the Fedder. Two things dominated Kendrick's thoughts: *Scooby will be happy, and hardly anyone ever calls me "Mister."*

Late that afternoon, there was a knock on the door of room 626 on

the orthopedic floor of the Crossway Medical Center. Kendrick woke from a light sleep, crossed the room, and opened the door. A young man, a uniformed courier of some sort, stood beside a cart. It held a birthday cake, a small arrangement of fresh flowers, and a large wrapped box.

“These are for Miss Lamisha Whitaker,” the young man said.

“From who?” Kendrick’s voice was tinged with suspicion.

“I don’t know, sir. I’m just supposed to deliver it. It doesn’t say who sent it. But here’s a card.” The young man handed two envelopes, one pink and one white, through the sliver of the open door.

“Do I have to pay for this?”

“No, sir. Somebody sent it to you.”

Kendrick looked at the envelopes. His name, with “Mr.” before it, was on the white one. On the pink one, in beautiful flowing script, were the words, “Happy 8th birthday, Scooby.”

The next morning, when his work shift was over, Kendrick walked to the fountain, hoping the old man might be there. He wanted to thank Mr. Theo for the birthday gifts. The box of art supplies — pens and pencils, paints and brushes, pastels and pads — had awakened a gladness in Lamisha’s face that her dad had not seen since the accident.

Kendrick also wanted to ask again why the man was being so generous to total strangers. Such largesse was unsettling, even a bit frightening. But something bigger, undefinable, gave Kendrick hope that the old man meant nothing but good.

Theo was not at the Fedder. Other than a couple of students, coffees in hand, the benches around the fountain were empty. Kendrick turned and caught the number 37 bus to the hospital.

CHAPTER 15

Late one night, in those quiet hours when old people find themselves inexplicably restless and awake, Theo got out of bed, put on his robe, poured a glass of water, and sat on the balcony in hopes that sleep would eventually overtake him. At such a moment, well past midnight and beyond even the energies of the most ardent revelers, the town gave way to profound serenity. It settled into the subdued plainness of brick, iron, and glass, a plainness that almost tempted Theo to prefer nighttime in the city over day.

Beneath him, the Promenade slept like an infant, at peace in the faint glow of street lamps and traffic signals.

In lieu of the normal soundtrack of Broadway, a welcome silence, a coda to the clamorous evening, lay claim to the thoroughfare. The falling water of the Fedder held forth an incessant whisper, like the white noise people stream through devices into their bedrooms to help them sleep at night. A careful listener like Theo might also have heard, or imagined, the faint sounds of the river in the distance, snaking around boulders on its southward journey.

The old man was of a growing persuasion that the world had become a much too noisy place, too full of manufactured sounds, unruly speech, and angry voices. And he was pleased, in these unsought moments of sleeplessness, to sit and surrender to the silence, his mind free to take him wherever it wished. He found in such moments the chance to draw upon memory and recall scenes from his long, storied life. He never knew, when he was alone like this, whose face from childhood, which town from adulthood, which agony or ecstasy from his past, or which hope for the future would assert itself in his thoughts. Invariably, the susurrus of the fountain and the calmness of night would lull him back, unresisting, into dreams.

If, as sometimes happened, human voices broke the hush along the Promenade, Theo would strain to hear what was being said and try to complete the larger conversation of which he was catching only a line or two. Hadn’t he, as a younger man, been a late-night voice himself on

too many occasions to count? Whose reverie might he have disrupted once upon a time?

It was on one such night, when the streets were utterly still and empty, that Theo first heard the song. He had assumed, mistakenly, that the faint sound of music was coming through the open window of a nearby apartment. Maybe someone had fallen asleep with a television on. Perhaps a merchant had forgotten at closing time to switch off the stereo in his business. Or could it be — what time was it, anyway? — that someone, Shep perhaps, had arrived unusually early to prepare for the workday. But no, it was none of those.

Four o'clock in the morning.

It was a soft voice, barely audible.

Female.

Gentle.

Not, despite Theo's first suspicions, the boisterousness or slur of inebriation.

Where is it coming from?

He leaned forward to hear better. No need to stand. At such a still hour, sounds carried eerily far, with almost frightening clarity, down the length of the median. And then, he saw her.

A woman.

Alone.

On a bench beside the fountain.

A bicycle.

A large hat.

She was not singing to be heard, and she might have been surprised to know someone was trying to listen to her, an effort made difficult by the spray of falling water. Nonetheless, Theo strained to block out everything but the singer's haunting, thin, tender voice. He was able to discern a melody and fragments of words. Try as he might, however, he could make no sense of them. The song was soft and slow. A lullaby, perhaps? A fado? A hymn?

She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her neck and shoulders bent slightly forward, a posture suggesting weariness. Her eyes were fixed on the pool of water, occasionally on her hands. She never looked left or right or behind. Theo could not imagine her reasons for being alone at

the fountain at such a late hour.

Such a forlorn sight, he thought. Alone, lonely, small, inscrutable, hiding. But also longing, singing, seeking something. Heaven?

After a while, there was more silence than singing, until the singing subsided altogether. The woman mumbled to herself, or to an absent someone, in tones too hushed to be understood. She seemed at home in the isolation of darkness.

When a lone police car drove by and slowed down at the fountain, she did not acknowledge its presence, nor did the patrolman disturb her.

Acquaintances, perchance?

Theo watched her, how long he couldn't say, until she rose, walked her bicycle to the street, mounted, and rode away, heading south. She paused but did not stop for the traffic signal at Light and Broad. She pulled ahead and dissolved, like a ghost, into the night.

CHAPTER 16

It was one more in a string of glorious Golden mornings. Tony and the four Penny Loafers sat in their wicker chairs outside the Verbivore.

Theo, out for one of his daily strolls, was walking toward them.

"Good morning, Mr. Theo."

Theo tipped his hat and bowed toward the group with a flourish. "And *bom dia* to all of you. Good morning."

"Now Mr. Theo," Tony said with a voice full of playful bluster, "myself and the committee were just talking about you, trying to figure out who you are, why you're here, and where you're actually from. Those are the sorts of important things we discuss here at the Verb since nobody here ever buys books or stumbles across new ideas." He wagged a thumb at the quartet.

"Theo, we know you're not really from Portugal. Nobody in the world is from Portugal. People around here don't even know where that is. From now on, tell people you're from Rome. When people ask you where you're from, say you're from Rome. That'll impress people. Tell'em you're an artist and you're connected to the Mafia, and you're here on business and you know all the Corleones. You know who the Corleones are, don't you? Al Pacino, Marlon Brando. Right? And wear the cap. That's a great touch, Theo. They'll believe you're an artist if you wear the beret. Isn't that what it's called, a beret? Maybe you should wear an ascot too. Tell people you got it from the Godfather. Tell 'em you and the Godfather are close. And Theo, tell them to buy a book. Tell 'em that the guy downtown is less than a week away from having to close his doors, and somebody is threatening to turn his bookstore into a massage parlor. Help me out, Theo."

And so on.

Theo mostly listened, smiled, and chortled, sometimes offering a word of mock sympathy.

Theo figured out early on that, when it was just the two of them, Tony presented a quite different persona than the one he displayed in the

company of others. Despite the image he typically projected — unserious, sarcastic, cantankerous — he had a thoughtful, serious side with a wide range of interests. He read voraciously (usually at night after the shop had closed), was intimately familiar with his inventory, possessed an adhesive memory for names and stories, and, when he wanted to be, was masterfully conversational.

From the time of their first encounter, they carried on thoughtful conversations — or portions of conversations — about authors, local history, and politics. They shared stories from their pasts, but only to a point, and only when no one else was nearby. In time, Theo believed, the bookseller's rough, impervious exterior would peel away, and Tony would reveal himself more fully without the protective veneer of sarcasm or humor.

Within the first month, Theo had already pieced enough of Tony's story together to know that the bookseller's gruff edge was hard-earned. He was a veteran of Vietnam. Infantry. Jungle stuff. Not the sort of thing he was willing to talk about, though he was otherwise outspoken about war, if only to argue the utter insanity of it.

In the 1960s, after his tour of duty, he had returned to the States, a fractured soul to a fractured homeland. He let his hair grow long, went to college, learned the temporary healing powers of bourbon and marijuana, married, bounced from job to job, got divorced, sobered up, worked for decades as copy editor at the local newspaper, retired early, and, with his considerable savings, bought the building on Broadway, long before there was much demand for real estate in the area.

His friends thought him crazy at the time. But as the transformation of downtown grew increasingly visible, Tony became celebrated for his foresight. With rents he eventually charged for his second and third stories — one for a group of marriage counselors, the other for an artist ("They're all up there working miracles while I'm down here trying to sell a damn book or two") — he was able to paint, patch, refurbish, furnish, and provide signage for the entire building. The Verbivore retained all the quaint character and organized chaos of a vintage bookstore, but it was prime real estate.

Tony's penchant for poor-mouthing was legendary along the Promenade. It was part of his quirky theatrical side. He had cultivated it into an art form and would plead poverty to anyone who gave him half a chance to do so.

"Tony, would you like to meet me at the Chalice tomorrow morning?

I'll buy you a coffee. Seven o'clock?"

"Thank you, Theo, I'll be there. I need to get used to charity coffee. At the rate I'm selling books, I'll be begging for a place to live pretty soon."

"Yes, you poor boy, let me help. The Godfather himself sent money to buy your coffee. But he'll probably want something in return, you know?"

The next morning, they stood in the line, breathing in the scent of coffee and bread, absorbing through their pores the good chemistry of the room. People mingled. Greetings and chatter were plentiful.

Tony's voice turned semi-serious. "So, Theo, tell me the truth, you don't really buy that whole 'heaven' thing, do you?"

Theo had suggested that the atmosphere in the Chalice that morning was heavenly, which had prompted Tony's question.

Before Theo could answer, Tony carried on. "I mean, OK, I know 'heavenly' can mean really good, like wine can be heavenly, and so can a woman or a sunset. Heavenly as an adjective or a figure of speech. Or heavenly as a state of mind. But you don't really think it's a place where we go, do you? How can you possibly believe that? Europeans don't buy that stuff anymore, do they?"

Theo smiled and tilted his head but offered no reply to the question. Not that he wasn't willing to answer; not that he didn't have thoughts on the matter; not that he was fearful of anyone's mockery. He simply felt the question deserved a better place, a better time, a better chance to be properly answered.

He nodded toward the drink counter.

"Now, Tony let me tell you. This young fellow, Shep, is an exceptional barista. I have enjoyed much, much coffee in my life, in many, many places. But I tell you, his coffee is as fine as any I've had anywhere. This week, it's Ethiopian beans, you know. Did you know it was the Ethiopian monks in Capuchin who discovered coffee? That's where we

get the lovely word ‘cappuccino.’ It’s true.”

It was not lost on Tony that Theo, the conversational escape artist, had adroitly avoided the question about heaven.

“Tony, tell me, where did you have the best cup of coffee of your life?”

The answer came without hesitation. Tony’s voice softened and, if only briefly, took on a tone that Theo had not yet heard from his sardonic friend.

“I can tell you. It was 1968. I had finished my last deployment in Vietnam. We got on a plane in Saigon, five days after being in the jungle. I was still cut to hell up and had bug bites all over me. We’d been fightin’ for over a month. A terrible month.”

Tony shuddered at the memory.

“I’d hardly eaten a thing. I slept on the plane until we got to American soil. When I knew I was really out of the jungle, on safe ground, I took a long shower, put on something other than camouflage, and ate a meal. It was the best everything I’ve ever eaten in my life. Best meat. Best bread. Best everything. Best coffee. Every bite of it was . . .” Tony paused and grinned. “. . . heavenly. And then I stayed drunk for a month.”

They reached the counter, exchanged greetings with Shep, and placed their orders.

Theo reached for his wallet.

“And now, Tony, my poor boy. Let me buy your coffee. And then we will study your portrait on the way out.”

Tony refused the offer with a flourish.

“No, no, no. No, sir. I pay my own way. I don’t want to owe anything to the Mob. Shep, this man,” Tony pointed to Theo, “this is a dangerous man. He’s from Rome. Mafia. Don’t trust him.”

Shep watched as the two men walked away. They stopped at the wall and leaned in to study Tony’s portrait. Theo pointed to one of its details. Tony said something. They both laughed and then left, Theo’s arm on the shoulder of his American friend.

It was the sort of moment Shep had hoped for when he opened the Chalice. Moments light and broad.

CHAPTER 17

Even before the first bestowal to Minnette, even before he moved into the Ponder House apartment, Theo searched for and found a comfortable bench, isolated and out of the way, where he could sit and watch the Oxbow River with minimal distraction. There were a number of sturdy, comfortable benches at strategic places along the paved walkway beside the river for use by the public.

The one Theo chose backed up to and was cradled beneath the thick limbs of a chestnut oak. He reckoned from the tree's size that it might be old enough to have witnessed the burning of the bridges when Union soldiers attempted to attack Golden from the western shore in 1865. If so, it would have been a mere sapling back then, barely breaking the red clay on the river bank.

Theo's year in Golden allowed him to watch that tree through a full cycle of seasons: tiny springtime buds becoming oblong, hand-sized leaves; light greens becoming deep green becoming scarlet and gold; pearl-sized cups becoming thumb-sized acorns; shade-making limbs blown bare by frigid winds.

But regardless of the season, this towering tree, as others had done in other places, served as Theo's quiet companion and mentor in the ancient ways of stillness and listening. It was good company for an old soul.

When evenings were unobligated, particularly during the temperate months of spring and fall, he would make the short walk from Ponder House to the riverside in time to be seated precisely fifteen minutes before sunset. If sunset was at 7:21, Theo would be on the bench, looking west, no later than 7:06.

He had carried this practice, this observation of sunset, to every place he'd lived for the past five decades. Around the world, a host of rivers had welcomed his solitary presence, always facing west, almost always empty-handed, always from the quarter hour before declension until the first star of evening became visible.

What Giverny was to Monet — a place that was never the same on

any two days — the sky above moving water was to Theo. Even as a boy, he had felt a gravitational pull to the western sky at the hour each day when the horizon dissolved landscape and heavens together.

That hour, that practice, that stillness had saved him when he was a younger man.

Though the memory was decades old, Theo never entirely escaped the dizziness, the difficulty breathing, or the disorientation that he had felt when he first got the news his daughter had been killed.

The ten-year-old had been the unexpected jewel of a loveless marriage, the *raison d'être* of the then-young man's life and the inspiration for all he hoped to do in the world. From rocky soil in which opposites had first been attracted and then repelled into cold civility, this flower of promise had bloomed. She dethroned all of Theo's previous deities the day she was born.

Tita. Named for her grandmother.

The young Theo, often away from home on business as his fortunes rose, began to reconfigure his life so that he could be near the child as much as possible. His return home to Tita at the end of workdays or trips abroad, those first moments of exuberant embrace between adorer and adored, became the moments around which he built his existence.

Even Theo's affection for his wife grew, in acknowledgment of the gift she had borne him.

He had been concerned, but not enough, about his wife's fondness for wine and spirits. The life she lived — license, privilege, respectability, boredom — was financed and well-fed by Theo's achievements. Their moves from one city of prominence to another, with immediate acceptance into the high culture of each new community, suited her taste for society and her need to be noticed. They also landed her in a world where strong drink was plentiful and routine and where her power of resistance was easily stretched beyond its limits. The part of her soul that she could not fill with the false transcendence of prestige, she filled or sedated with vodka and scotch.

Theo at first relished, then endured, and eventually loathed the perks of his business success and wealth. Social gatherings, tuxedoed events, balls, galas, concerts, and galleries became the bane of his existence, the more so as each event encroached on his time with Tita. His fondness for people never waned, but the pretense, on full display at many of the social events filling his calendar, became insufferable to him. The same attention that his wife found intoxicating, he found mildly sickening. He tolerated it as a necessary part of being a highly successful entrepreneur.

Theo was in New York City at a ceremony in the United Nations building when he got the call. An international connection from France, with a slight and inconvenient delay, informed him — a trusted secretary was bearer of the tragic news — that his daughter had been killed in an automobile accident, a single-car accident caused when Theo's seriously inebriated wife, also killed, lost control of her expensive car, left the roadway, flipped repeatedly, and came to rest at the foot of a slightly damaged beech tree.

For weeks, every thought of Tita made Theo gasp and sob at the nauseating finality of her death. The impossibility of her return, the endlessness of his waiting for her presence, the suffocating silence of the house, his inability to find any words to express what he felt, and the haunting realization that it did not have to happen drove Theo to near madness. Sleeplessness, tremors, and starvation became his reality. His suffering was aggravated by a sense of guilt that took the form of a single tormenting question: "Did I not protect my child?"

Newsmongers in the press and gossips in social circles tried in vain to pierce his silence and isolation. To him, those heartless, curious beasts were nonexistent, as was everything and everyone else in the universe.

Only grief existed.

And it was everywhere.

The few who did see Theo during that time, a handful of friends and family, saw a desperate emptiness in his eyes that itself was a form of death. No words of encouragement, no news of the marketplace, and no prospect of future endeavors could entice him from the abyss of his loss.

He had other houses to which he might flee and the means to stay

away for as long as he wished, but he chose to remain at his home near Paris. His decision not to leave was more visceral than rational.

If he could not be close to Tita's living body, he could at least remain close to her grave. If he could not feel her breath, he could at least be where she had most recently breathed.

But God, the ache. The ache! Oh God, the ache.

One morning, just days after Tita's burial, Theo woke before sunrise, dressed, left the house, and began walking. He had no route in mind and no destination. He told no one of his departure. He did not return home until that evening. His friends, in the interim, had worried themselves sick, fearing the worst.

"I have been walking" was all the explanation he gave in response to their questions and scoldings. It was a truthful answer. His walk that day, and for the many that followed, was simply a way to save himself from drowning in guilt and regret.

Springtime came early that year. Some said it was the longest spring France had ever known. And like a blind animal moving instinctively toward a mother's scent, Theo left the oppressive walls of his villa early each morning to be in the presence of the season's beauty. Even in his darkest hour, he was drawn, if unconsciously, to space and verdure and color.

And so, he walked. And walked.

Every day.

As if his life depended on it, he walked. Alone.

Tirelessly.

Desperately.

The large plot of land that surrounded Theo's home outside of Paris was laced with a labyrinth of trails that ran through forest and field. Beyond his own property were miles and miles of hillside and country that he was free to roam. Some days, his lone figure was seen at such long distances apart that locals assumed he must be hitchhiking or driving from one spot to another. But not so. His walking was driven by fear and hope, fear of the thoughts that would catch him if he sat still and hope that he might somehow walk himself into a stupor or oblivion or, better, into the place where he would find Tita.

Pursued or pursuing, he walked.

Bedraggled, unkempt, inconsolable, he walked. Furious, frightened, fitful, he walked.

At day's end, he would return to the damnable emptiness of his home and, if fortunate, collapse from exhaustion. The temptation to drink or drug himself into sleep was never strong enough to overcome his remembrance of what that power had already taken from him. He would not grant it the pleasure of a third casualty even if, quite strongly, he longed to escape the world.

Eventually, the dark spell broke.

After weeks of walking, the beauty that had surrounded him, beauty to which grief had temporarily numbed him, became consciously present again.

It was evening. The sight of lush fields, the scent of turned soil, the color of innumerable blossoms, and the cool air of April conspired against the death and darkness that he carried into their midst. His first lucid thought — "this is lovely" — felt like a betrayal of his daughter. He tried to stifle it with the argument that, in her absence, goodness was no longer possible in the world.

But then the appearance of additional co-conspirators, a little boy and girl on bicycles, laughing as they tried to outpace a playful dog, struck him with the inescapable recognition that life would and must go on, even if altogether new and subject to a grief that would be present with every step. Theo stopped to let the thought take firmer hold.

He *wanted* it to prevail. He was tired.

So . . . grievously . . . tired.

He walked along a path that ran beside the River Marne. At a high

brow overlooking the ribbon of water, he sat. Theo had seen the small bench many times in his frantic ambulations but had never once considered stopping to rest. Nor had he ever seen anyone else sitting there. This time, however, under the spell of a resplendence that would not be denied, he took a seat. His hands were empty. The sun was minutes from sinking below the tree line on the distant horizon. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, yielding as best he could to the slight peace that was trying to claim some corner of his heart.

He removed his hat, bowed his head wearily, and, sensing what was to come, covered his face with both hands. His breath shortened until tears — could there be any left after weeks of crying? — filled his haggard eyes. He wept . . . and moaned . . . and choked on his sorrow until one final eruption of longing, and a sob that seemed to carry the hurt of all his stolen hopes, tore through his chest. Bit by bit, he emptied the bitter cauldron of his anguish and then sat in silent stillness. He forced himself to take a deep breath, and then another. His body relaxed. His head remained bowed, cradled in fingers that were soaked with tears. Slowly, a calmness, absolute and irresistible, began to possess him with such presence that, in those moments, he knew his season of darkest grief was over.

He dried his eyes on his forearms, lifted his face, and sat upright on the bench. He heard faint sounds of children laughing in the distance. The last tiny sliver of sun was visible behind trees on the skyline.

When he was able to see clearly again, a motion above the river caught his attention.

A cloud of birds — starlings and redwings, thousands upon thousands of them — flew with synchronized precision, a dancing funnel, undulating in perfect unison. Theo had learned somewhere in his past that the spectacle was called a murmuration. His soul caught its breath at the sight, like a swimmer coming up from the depths. For that moment he could separate beauty from his grief, and celebrate, if only ambivalently, that there was still a world of goodness apart from, or bigger than, his aching loneliness.

Above and behind the aerial ballet of bird flight, the clouds began to robe themselves in color, as if the sky, too, was fighting for the heart of this wounded man. The slow, subtle changes, akin to tilting a cluster of opal beneath light, in which one tint dissolves into another, hinted that the great expanse overhead was alive, a thriving nest of angels and hope.

The sheer wonderment of the moment, the wings of fifty thousand birds, and the intoxicating surplus of beauty, overwhelmed him, as though a rope that had been pulled taut, that tied him to the darkness of Tita's death, had snapped and fallen powerless to the ground.

Theo's eyes filled with tears again — weariness? Hope? Forgiveness? Surrender? — as he lay his head back and looked into the open sky above him.

A single star caught his eye.

A tiny glimmer.

Searching from horizon to horizon, he confirmed that it was the first and only star in the sky.

"Tita, darling, look. A star . . . for us."

He heard a lone dove in the distance and imagined his daughter beside him. Imagined that she too saw the ballet of the birds, saw the single star — was the single star? — heard the mournful song.

He rose, clasped his hands behind his back, and went home.

Looking back on that moment, he realized that, in the time between the quarter hour before sunset and the first star of dusk, somehow under the spell of that April evening in France, his splintered soul had begun to heal. It would happen in fits and starts. It would be a healing that would never, at least in this life, be total or final. But it was the moment when the fever broke for him.

And the moment when heaven took possession of his soul.

A host of faint recollections — words from his mother, the Story he had been taught from the priest, fragments of music, images of the Christ that he had pondered in museums around the world, books he had read — all converged in the beauty of that riverside moment and coalesced into a name, a hope, a Love that changed him forever.

Theo eventually sold the majestic house and moved far away from the parish where his daughter was buried. In every place he ever lived after that, he insisted his home be within walking distance of a river, with a view to the west, and with a bench or a place to put one.

And on many days, sometimes for many consecutive days at a stretch, he would check the local morning paper for the exact time of sunset to ensure that he would be punctual for his date with a ten-year-old girl whose laughter was a murmuration and whose memory was a single star, the brightest in all the sky.

CHAPTER 18

Three pristine blossoms of gardenia, in a vase on the credenza beside Mr. Ponder's desk, perfumed the office with their ineffable sweetness.

In front of the desk stood Mrs. Gidley.

Mr. Ponder reached out to give her a piece of paper. "Anita, here are two more names for Theo. And here are his letters to go with them. Do these things first, please."

Mrs. Gidley looked at the list with the same enthusiasm she might have given a speeding ticket. She shook her head. "How many of these do you think Mr. Theo is going to do?"

"From what he tells me, he wants to give all of the portraits to their owners. That's what he calls them, 'owners.' I believe there are over ninety altogether. I'm impressed you've been able to find addresses for all of them so far. Especially the students."

Mrs. Gidley was pleased with the compliment. "Some of them have been pretty hard to find, but Shep knows most of the people. Between him and the internet, we've been lucky. But I still think this is all pretty strange."

She was not yet willing to acknowledge her enjoyment of Theo's project and her growing sense that she was part of something admirable.

"Mr. Ponder, even now, I'm not sure I trust the man. There's just something suspicious about him. I can't put my finger on it but . . .."

Mr. Ponder looked up. "Anita, have a seat. I want to tell you something."

It was obvious from his tone, a tone she knew well, that he had thought about whatever it was he was about to say.

"Anita, you know our business as well as I do, and I don't like keeping secrets from you. You know that I trust you. That's not the issue. It's just that there are times I'm required to keep things to myself, and this is one of those times. Theo insisted upon it. I'll admit he's an unusual case, but I at least want you to know this."

Mr. Ponder had Mrs. Gidley's full attention for whatever "this" happened to be.

"Before taking Theo into Ponder House, I made a number of phone calls in his presence and also did some other due diligence. You know I wouldn't have taken him on if I thought there was a problem."

Mrs. Gidley nodded.

Mr. Ponder paused. "Anita, many years ago, Theo was a client of my father."

Mrs. Gidley sat up straight. Her eyes registered utter surprise, lifting like drawbridges to allow entry of the revelation into her mind. She scrolled through her memory for any clue that Theo had been in Ponder House during her decades of employment there. Her memory was blank.

"I checked our files," he continued. "Theo suggested I do so as proof of his character, and I found Dad's notes. It verified what Theo had told me about himself, and that's why I took him on as a client. I want you to know he is not a man to fear or be suspicious about. That's all I can tell you, but I hope it'll put your mind at ease."

Mrs. Gidley was a cauldron of questions, but she restrained herself and simply thanked Mr. Ponder "very much." She looked again at the list of names. "I'll get these addresses and mail the letters this afternoon."

And so she did.

CHAPTER 19

Kendrick had been at the hospital for only a matter of minutes one Tuesday morning when a man in surgical scrubs walked confidently into room 626 at Crossway Medical Center and introduced himself.

“Mr. Whitaker, my name is Goodson Ikande. I will be Lamisha’s doctor for the rest of her treatment.”

He was a tall, slender man with delicate hands, close-cropped hair, and smooth ebony skin. His speaking voice was a blend of British precision and Nigerian lilt. He wore wire-rimmed eyeglasses.

He turned his attention to Lamisha. “And you must be Lamisha.”

He took her small hand in both of his and leaned toward her. ”I’m very glad, very, very glad to be your doctor,” he whispered. “Call me Dr. Good, OK?”

On the previous day, Dr. Ikande had received a call from James Ponder. “Dr. Ikande, thank you for taking my call. I got your number from the hospital medical director. She speaks very highly of you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ponder. It’s nice to speak with you. Yes, she told me you would be calling. Please tell me about the little girl.”

Mr. Ponder outlined Lamisha’s story: the automobile accident, her mother’s death, the long hospital stay, the musical chair of doctors, and the hardship on the family.

“Dr. Ikande, I’m calling to ask if you might be willing to take the young lady as a patient. Her family doesn’t have private insurance, and she’s been treated by various doctors at this point. We would like one doctor to handle her case for the remainder of her treatment and the medical director says you’re the best.”

The hospital medical director had, in fact, given a glowing recommendation of Dr. Ikande. He was born and raised in Nigeria, received his medical degree in London, completed a fellowship in pediatric orthopedics at Boston Children’s Hospital, and maintained a thriving practice with a group in Golden. He was widely recognized as an authority in his field and well-respected for charitable work he

routinely did abroad, at his own expense, treating children with leg injuries caused by landmines.

“And Mr. Ponder, how do you know the little girl?” Dr. Ikande asked.

”I’m representing a private individual, a benefactor, who wishes to remain anonymous. He’s a friend of the Whitaker family and wants to help them, but he doesn’t want them to feel indebted to him in any way. If you take the case, you will bill him through my office. He is very capable of covering any costs involved and very happy to do so. He is hopeful you might be able to help the little girl. I know this is rather unusual, but the gentleman wants the best for the child and her family.”

“Yes, it is rather unusual,” Dr. Ikande agreed, “but I appreciate your client’s benevolence. I will talk with the medical director and have my office get back to you.”

Later that day, Dr. Ikande accepted the case, agreed to request and review Lamisha’s records immediately, and promised to meet with her family as soon as possible. The next morning, between surgeries, he met his new patient in room 626.

Mr. Ponder met with Theo to inform him of the arrangement. “Theo, Lamisha is in good hands. The doctor is a remarkable man who specializes in treatment of leg injuries. He reviewed her records and said her condition is serious, but he’s cautiously optimistic of a good outcome. I got the impression he was not terribly pleased with the level of care she’s received so far. He said she’ll probably always have a limp, but there’s no threat of losing the leg.”

Theo nodded. He was pleased that Lamisha’s future care would be consistent and high quality. He was not sure how he might thank the doctor.

“And this will all be kept confidential?”

“That’s correct. The Whitakers only know that a new doctor is going to be taking care of her. I told Dr. Ikande that a concerned friend had gotten involved. He understands the need for discretion. From what I can tell, he is a generous man himself. I hope the two of you can meet sometime. Rest assured Lamisha is in the best of hands with him.”

“That’s very good. Thank you, James.” By then the two men were on a first-name basis. “And what have we worked out for the

grandmother?”

“Right. I got in touch with her employer. We’re still working out the details, but basically they’re going to give her paid leave until Lamisha is back home and situated. We’ll deposit some funds with her employer, and they’ll use that to pay her for as long as she’s on leave. The folks who own the company are old friends of mine. I told them I was working on behalf of a client who wishes to remain anonymous, so they’ll keep it all secret. They spoke very highly of Mrs. Whitaker.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” Theo grinned and patted Ponder’s forearm. “I hope you enjoy this as much as I do. We might just become a formidable force for good at this rate, yes? ‘On earth as it is in heaven.’”

“Actually Theo, I find this all rather curious, but it’s certainly admirable. People like you renew my hope in humanity.”

“Yes, we can be such a terrible race at times, but, at the same time, terribly wonderful. All capable of saintliness. You, too, James. You too.”

CHAPTER 20

It was inevitable, given their proximity to one another, that Asher Glissen and Theo would eventually cross paths. It happened at the Chalice one mid-morning.

The old man was standing with his back to the entrance when Asher entered and walked past him. As Asher placed his drink order at the counter, Shep nodded in Theo's direction. "There's the guy, your patron, the one who's been buying your pictures."

Asher turned to the gratifying sight of Theo perusing one of the portraits. The old man was oblivious to everything else around him. Such intensity of observation was the highest praise anyone could possibly pay to the artist. Asher felt honored.

But he was also curious as to the old man's intent. Minnette, the day after her meeting with Theo, had given Asher a glowing report about their encounter at the Fedder, but she knew very few details about the man. All Asher knew was that a man from Portugal, a pleasant newcomer to town, had purchased a number of the portraits and had expressed an interest in all the ones still on the walls.

"Excuse me, sir, good morning. I don't mean to interrupt you, but I believe I owe you a thank you. I'm Asher Glissen."

Theo had been studying the portrait of a little girl wearing a baseball cap. It took him a moment to reorient himself and break away from whatever thoughts filled his head at the moment. When he realized who was standing in front of him, he turned to face the younger man full on, smiled and nodded nervously, and fumbled to string a sentence together.

"Oh, well, yes, yes . . . of course . . . how nice . . . good morning. My, my, I'm so honored to meet you, Mr. Glissen. This is no interruption at all. I am a great admirer of your work. Uh, um, this is very nice indeed. Thank you for speaking. My name is Theo."

Asher accepted the offered handshake with the politeness and respect due an elder. True to his habit, Theo held Asher's right hand in both of his own. He was nothing less than spellbound — starstruck? — to be in

the presence of the portrait master. His eyes shone brightly.

Asher, true to *his* habit, closely examined the features of Theo's face. *It would be a good face to draw*, he thought. *He has strong eyes*.

"Shep tells me you've bought several of the portraits, and I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your encouragement. That means a lot to me." He nodded to the portrait Theo had been studying. "Her name is Lila. She's a delightful little girl. She had just come from ballet practice when I took her picture."

Theo nodded. "You have captured her beautifully, as you have all the others. Even her eyes are full of dance. And yes, Mr. Glissen, I *have* acquired several of the portraits so far, but only to give them good homes. I am very pleased that I discovered them. Young man, you are a master at what you do. Have you time to sit and visit?"

Asher received the compliments with poise. This was not his first time hearing high praise of his work.

"Thank you, Mr. Theo — is that right, Theo?"

"Only Theo, please, no 'mister.'"

"Well, Theo, I'd love to visit, but I have a meeting in just a few minutes. Could you come by my studio sometime? It's not far from here, and I'll be there all day tomorrow. Will that work for you?"

"It would, yes, but I don't want to take you from your work."

"Well, I appreciate that, but my schedule is flexible. Why don't you come in the morning, and we can visit over coffee? Is nine o'clock too early for you? Just knock good and loud when you come. I usually lock the door when I'm working."

Asher gave Theo directions to his studio and a phone number, exchanged a few more well wishes, and then turned to leave.

Theo watched Asher walk out, watched him speak to a young couple on the sidewalk, watched him place his coffee in a cup holder between the handlebars of his bicycle, and watched him ride away. Theo took a deep breath, removed his glasses, took another deep breath, and then left the shop.

The plan was working just as he had hoped.

CHAPTER 21

When Theo had taken his first walk down the sidewalks of the Boughery, the day after his arrival in Golden, he felt as if he'd stumbled upon a place that was vintage Americana. That feeling grew with each stroll through the neighborhood. He learned that many of the extant old houses were built in the mid to late 1800s, when Broadway and downtown were the center of life in the community.

The exteriors of those houses — gables, columns, porticoes, handrails, dormers, ceilings, doors, window frames — pointed to a bygone architectural era that celebrated whimsy and individuality in residential design.

Porches were standard fare. Some wrapped around the entire circumference of the houses to which they were attached. Others were mere nooks, often beside a front door. All allowed for and seemed to encourage the blessed leisure art of sitting and relaxed conversation.

Lawns and gardens in the Boughery were well-groomed and meticulously cared-for. On spring and summer days, the scent of gardenia, tea olive, camellia, and narcissus beckoned walkers closer and closer to the yards, where those fragrant plants grew in abundance.

In the early generations of Golden's history, houses in the Boughery had belonged to wealthy leaders in the community. More recently, during Golden's rejuvenation, many of the houses had been purchased by an eclectic assortment of artists, young families, professionals, and affluent history buffs who were willing to live at the borderlands of an increasingly gentrified town center to the north and a chronically impoverished low-rent district to the south.

An abiding hope that the downtown would continue to flourish and, at the same time, retain a healthy regard for the city's past was a common trait amongst the tribe of Boughery residents. They were proud and protective of their little province, Asher among them.

At 8:58 a.m., Theo arrived at 107 South Broadway, on the west side of the median. It was a three-story house — pewter gray with green

trim, red front door, and wraparound porch on three sides. Though obviously intended to be a residence at its inception, Asher and Brooke had bought it cheap and converted it into a studio.

Asher did most of his work there, awash in natural light and able, through an assortment of strategically placed windows, to see trees and sky at all times with a mere tilt or turn of his head.

Theo climbed five steps up to the porch and knocked on the door. He was a mixture of mild uneasiness and eagerness at the prospect of conversation with the young prodigy. As he waited for Asher to answer, he surveyed the porch. It was deep and long on the front side with a balustrade of turned hourglass spindles.

The porch ceiling was painted powder blue. An old superstition held that such a practice was effective at keeping bad spirits from entering a house and also at keeping spiders from spinning webs in the corners. Perhaps it worked. No bad spirits seemed to be present as Theo waited for Asher's welcome, nor did he see any spiders.

Bronze wind chimes, still and silent at the moment, hung at one end of the porch. An assortment of wicker furnishings, neatly organized and cared-for, filled the area without crowding it. Theo was making mental notes of flowers and plants around the lawn when he heard footsteps inside the house.

Asher opened the door and wiped blue paint from his right hand with a towel, before holding it out to Theo.

"Good morning, Theo. Sorry to make you wait. I was just finishing a canvas and cleaning my brushes."

Theo hesitated to step inside. "Please, Mr. Asher, let me come back at a more convenient time. I can come whenever you'd like. I don't want to take you from your work."

"No, really," Asher insisted. "This is a perfect time. I woke up early and came on over to touch up something I was working on last night. I just finished, so we can celebrate over coffee. Please, this is a good time. Come in."

Finally convinced, Theo entered as Asher held the door for him. The smell of coffee and the strains of music, something baroque, greeted them. Theo, in true European fashion, presented a bouquet of flowers to Asher.

“Thank you, Theo. Ah, echinacea and narcissus. My mother’s favorites. How did you know?” Asher pointed to the wall behind Theo. “Here’s a painting I did years ago for her. Echinacea and narcissus. I’m guessing you saw it on my website, or Shep tipped you off. Thank you. Anything that makes me think of my mom is welcome here.”

Theo had barely glanced at the painting when Asher directed him to the back of the house. The walls along the hallway were filled with Asher’s work. Theo was tempted to stop and linger with each step but he resisted, settling instead for mere glances left and right as he walked to the large room that served as Asher’s work area.

Throughout that large, open room — hanging on the walls, displayed on the floor, stacked on tables, framed, unframed, matted, large, small, painted, drawn, finished, unfinished, landscapes, cityscapes, birds, flowers, nudes, still lifes, portraits and more portraits — the genius and exuberant output of Asher Glissen was on stunning display. For Theo, 107 South Broadway was sensory overload. If the entrance hall was an appetizer, this room was the main course of a feast.

Three easels — facing the south, west, and north walls — held canvasses or drawings in various stages of completion.

On one was an unfinished oil portrait, slightly less than life-sized, of a distinguished older man. He was standing in what appeared to be a home library. The tones were dark and subdued.

The middle easel held a somewhat smaller work in progress, a pencil drawing of a child on snow-white paper. She was kneeling on a sidewalk beside a bucket of chalk, drawing a large smiley face that was asymmetrical and disproportionate.

In Asher’s composition, there was no background at all to the little girl. The viewer was forced to see her and only her.

The intricacy of the lines that composed the child, the soft shading of her face, the smallness of her body against the bare background, and the delicacy with which those elements had been laid on the paper created a sense that she had been whispered into existence. The drawing, as Asher explained later, was an illustration — one of forty-six — that he had done for a children’s book.

The third easel was a riverscape after nightfall. In contrast to the realism of the other two, this one, on a wide narrow Gessobord, was an

impressionistic work in oil in which dense layers of color had been applied with a palette knife.

The river in the painting was stippled in various shades of blue, black, white, and peach. The tree line, in deep greens, stood against a night sky that was purple at the horizon and darkened into blackness as it ascended. The piece was unlike Asher's other work and yet, to Theo's eye, it bore the same delicacy of touch that was a defining quality of the artist's style.

Theo took a cursory glance around the room, resisting again his desire to observe and study each piece closely. The sheer richness of the place washed over him. Soft morning light, the scent of paint, the finery of oriental rugs, the aura of mastery, the history of the space, and the younger man's inviting presence enlivened the older.

Theo would have gladly foregone conversation, at least for a while, to meander from frame to frame, stack to stack, wall to wall, easel to easel. But when Asher offered coffee and nodded to a pair of cushioned chairs with a small table between them, Theo politely took a seat.

"Asher, thank you for letting me come by. I see now that you do more than portraits."

Asher shrugged. "I try. Portraits have definitely been my bread and butter over the years, and I'm always honored when somebody asks me to do one for them. I love the challenge of drawing faces. Plus, I have a wife and daughter and a mortgage and all that, and portraits pay the bills. But I like to always have something I'm working on for the sheer pleasure of being creative. That one," Asher pointed to the river scene on the easel, "is my present diversion. Ones like that usually don't sell, but they pay me in other ways. They help keep me in love with what I do. But enough about me. What's your story, Theo? I detect an accent. Where's home?"

Asher already knew, from speaking with his niece, Minnette, that Theo was from Portugal, but he asked anyway.

"I have lived in many places," Theo said, "but I was born and grew up in Portugal, a little town near Porto in the north, a place called Pinhão, in the Douro River Valley with the hills and vineyards. It was a wonderful place to be a child. My parents were simple people, farmers, but they loved beauty, and they loved books, though we didn't have so

many. They died many years ago. I have been a businessman and investor for much of my life, so I've lived in big cities for the most part: Paris, Florence, Rio. I have a home in New York City now. I've been there for almost twenty years."

"And what brings you to Golden?"

"I have some properties nearby that need my attention."

Asher remained silent momentarily in the hope that Theo might say more. Theo didn't, using the pause instead to sip his coffee.

"How long will you be here?" Asher asked.

"I'm not sure, but Mr. Ponder — you know him, yes? — has been kind enough to let me rent his apartment at Ponder House. It's a lovely place."

Asher seemed surprised. "I didn't know Mr. Ponder rented that apartment, but I'm happy to hear it. You'll have a front-row seat to the Promenade from up there."

Theo nodded. "I'm very fortunate. It's a beautiful place. You'll have to come see me sometime."

"Theo, I hope the locals have been kind to you so far. I've been in Golden pretty much all my life — not a very ambitious artist, I guess — and I can't really compare it to anywhere else, but I know we've got some fine, generous people in our town. Got plenty of problems and bad elements too, but there seems to be a prevailing goodness here most of the time."

Theo nodded again. "I confess, I came here with some preconceived ideas about the South — some good, some not so good — but the only ones I've confirmed so far have been the good ones. Golden strikes me as a nice place. The town is fortunate you stayed here all these years. So, Asher, please tell me about yourself. I feel that I know a bit about you from seeing your art, but what is your story?"

"Well, it's pretty simple, really. I grew up here in Golden. My parents did too. They were old blood in the community, so my roots are deep here. My mom was a homemaker mostly, but she was an artist too. She studied art in college, actually took some classes in Madrid, at the Prado. A lotta things were changing in our country at the time — ya know, political stuff in the sixties, Vietnam and such — but I never got the sense she was very interested in all that.

“She was real tenderhearted and had a wonderful eye for beauty. She tried to pass that down to my brother and me. I don’t think there was a day when I was growing up that there weren’t vases full of flowers in our house. She was quiet, sort of melancholy in a way, but always pleasant.

“My dad owned an ad agency. He wasn’t an artist himself, but he appreciated talent. I was their first child. I was born just a few months after they married. It was something of a scandal in our little town, but they survived it.

“I have one brother, named Pearce. I’m not very close to him. I was drawn to the smell of paint and linseed oil. He was drawn to the smell of money. Not a bad guy, but he thinks that all of this,” Asher’s hand swept the room, “is a very questionable use of time. He’s a tough one. I understand you met his daughter, Minnette.”

Theo smiled brightly and nodded.

“I call her ‘the world’s greatest niece,’” Asher continued. “She’s had some tough knocks, but Brooke and I are crazy about her. She and my mom adored each other. Minnie and Gammy.”

Asher was not used to talking so freely about matters so personal. He would remark later that the old man listened in a way that made one dangerously willing to talk. A business partner had once described it as Theo’s superpower. It was fully functional as Asher continued his story.

“Anyway, I went to a small college to study art, and when I finished, I came back here, thinking I would only stay a while and then move to a big city and try to establish a reputation in a bigger market. I think a lot of artists have that dream.”

Theo nodded.

“I ended up falling in love with a girl I’d known since grade school: Brooke. We got married, and we have one child, a daughter named Samantha. We call her ‘Sam.’ She’s a schoolteacher in South Carolina.”

“And your parents?”

“Well, my dad died not too long ago. He was sort of a soft-spoken, melancholy soul himself, but he was a good man and a good dad. He lived with me and Brooke at the end of his life. My mom died a few years ago of Alzheimer’s. I was fortunate I was always able to spend a lot of time with her, especially toward the end of her life. Her mind was

really gone, and she said some bizarre things, but she never got mean like some people do when they get the disease. It was hard on all of us to watch her trickle away, and it pretty much broke us financially, but I'm glad I was here. Up to the very end, she seemed to enjoy painting."

Theo nodded. He had listened without a twitch.

"Your mother must have been very pleased you became an artist. You were a fine student."

Asher smiled. "I hope so."

"I think maybe you don't realize how gifted you are," Theo said. He leaned slightly forward, as if to emphasize his point.

Asher smiled again, a bit embarrassed by the compliment. He made a sound somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh, then attempted a response.

"Well, I know I enjoy what I do, but I guess it's for someone else to judge how good I am at it. That's how the art world works, right?"

"Is it?" Theo shifted his weight in the arm chair. "Asher, let me ask it this way: from *your* point of view as a professional artist, what makes something 'good art'?"

"You should know better, Theo. Ask an artist what it takes to make good art and you're almost sure to get an autobiography in response."

Theo chuckled, and Asher continued.

"It's hard enough to define what art is, much less 'good art.' I wonder if there is such a thing. Maybe there are just good responses. But I guess if a work of art makes us see something familiar in a new way or makes us feel something we ought to have felt all along or shows us our place in the world more clearly, maybe then it qualifies as 'good.' If it makes us better somehow, maybe that's what gives it value."

Asher paused for a sip of coffee and to gather his thoughts before he continued. Theo remained silent.

"That means, of course, that 'good art' varies from one person to another, doesn't it? And that good art can come from a child or a master. I don't think the critics, especially the moderns, appreciate that idea very much. I think they like telling us what's legitimate as art, what has worth and what doesn't."

Asher looked at the old man. "Theo, I get the impression you've

thought about this before. What do you think makes for good art?"

Theo rested his chin on his right thumb and placed a bent index finger over his bottom lip.

"Yes, I *have* thought about it. In fact, I've thought about it a great deal. And I've asked others about it. But I don't know if I have an answer either. Other than this. It might not make a lot of sense, but for anything to be good, truly good, there must be love in it. I'm not even sure I know fully what that means, but the older I get, the more I believe it. There must be love for the gift itself, love for the subject being depicted or the story being told, and love for the audience. Whether the art is sculpture, farming, teaching, lawmaking, medicine, music, or raising a child, if love is not in it — at the very heart of it — it might be skillful, marketable, or popular but I doubt it is truly good. Nothing is what it's supposed to be if love is not at the core."

Theo snickered at himself. "I think I sound like a crazy old man again."

Asher shook his head. "Not at all. But I do wonder, Theo, how do you know if something has love in it?"

Theo nodded. "Yes, yes. That is the question, isn't it? And I'm not sure I know the answer to that either. But God does."

Asher looked into his coffee cup. "Hmm . . . I'll have to think about that. It's an interesting idea. One thing I do know with certainty is if 'good' means art that makes someone famous and sells for lots of money, I'm not a very good artist, certainly no master."

Theo made no reply, other than a slight nod.

"Don't get me wrong," Asher continued. "I'm grateful for what I get to do. I'm a gainfully employed artist with a loyal clientele, good friends, and a beautiful family. You could even say I've been a successful artist. And I hope something worthwhile has come out of this studio over the years. But to answer your question, I have serious doubts about how 'good' I am. All of these unsold pieces around here would be an argument against me."

Again, Theo nodded thoughtfully before speaking. "Don't you think even the very great artists worked with many unsold pieces around them?"

Asher nodded. "Fair question. And yeah, they probably did. At least

until they died.”

A phone rang.

“Theo, forgive me. I meant to tell you. I’m expecting a call about a commission. Would it be OK if I check to see who’s calling?”

“By all means.”

Asher looked at his phone. “This is the call. It might take a little while. Make yourself at home, and feel free to look around. You can dig through the stacks, or go in the front rooms, whatever you’d like. I’ll keep this as short as I can.”

CHAPTER 22

Asher got up and walked to one of the front rooms that served as his office. He closed the door behind him. Theo put down his coffee cup, rose from his chair, and stood hesitantly for several seconds, uncertain of which stack or corner to visit first. Street sounds, muffled in the distance, reminded him there was life outside the sanctum of the studio. But he was heedless of it all as he returned to the front hallway and began his tour of Asher's world.

An array of framed items, displayed higgledy-piggledy, filled the left wall, floor to ceiling: a feather, a page torn from a book with the word "dulcet" circled, small framed pieces by artists named Sutphin and Lanier, various certificates from art organizations and civic groups, and a child's stick figure with the words "you are my best Dabby in the werl."

Theo turned to look at the opposite wall. Only a few items hung there, all of them precisely arranged.

One of those items, displayed at eye level, was an oil painting, two feet square, of a lone tree in a field. It seemed to be more a study than a finished work.

The colors and foliage in the painting indicated a spring day. A splash of crimson was on the ground. A blanket? In the field, slightly right of center, was what appeared to be an artist's easel. Behind the easel stood a barely visible figure, presumably a woman. Only the arms and legs could be seen. At the bottom of the canvas were the words, written in freehand, "Me, painting you, painting."

Judging from the frame, and the slight yellowing at the edges of the canvas, the piece was old.

That painting was surrounded by four handwritten letters in separate frames. They came from four different writers, on stationery of various sizes and tones. Each was addressed to Asher who, judging by the dates of the letters, must have been a young boy when they were sent to him. They all acknowledged Asher's hope of being an artist someday. One was from his grandfather. The others were from artists — renowned artists — prosperous enough to have engraved stationery with letterhead, office addresses, and gallery listings.

Theo knew the names on the letters; even people unfamiliar with the art world would have known them. As he read what they had written to the young Asher, he was impressed by the warmth of their tone. Theo's own experience with artists had led him to the unflattering belief that they were often detached and impersonal, sometimes pompous and self-important. These letters were an argument to the contrary. They used words that a child could understand. They were short, the longest just a couple of paragraphs. At the bottom of one, the writer had drawn a small bird and a lightning bolt.

Theo continued down the hall. A dozen, twenty, fifty objects begged for his attention. He hoped that, in time, he might be granted an unhurried opportunity to revisit the studio and study all that was there.

The drawing that captured Theo's attention, the one nearest him, was a pencil rendering of a female figure, waist up, bare except for a scarf that covered one shoulder. Her face and eyes were turned slightly upward. There was a dreaminess about her countenance. Each feature — the unbrushed hair, the half-open eyes, the prominent cheekbone, the porcelain lips and tapered chin, the curved neck, the lift of her breast and torso, the veined hands and delicate fingers — was an intricate matrix of lines, some razor thin, some bold, all delicate, and all as sensual as the Song of Solomon. Together, the features and line strokes created a technically precise, ethereal composition. The beauty of human flesh, "fearfully and wonderfully made," radiated from the frame.

The drawing was done on gray bristol board, paired perfectly with a wide ebony frame.

The frame.

***How is it,* Theo wondered, *that a piece of paper — a letter, a photo, a ticket stub, a sketch, a painting — is suddenly transformed by placing it in four bits of wood beneath a pane of glass? What does it mean that we place permanent boundaries around transient moments? What does it say of humankind that we take such trouble to freeze specific memories, that we devote such energy to capturing and preserving the "minute particulars" of our lives*?**

Theo could hear Asher's muffled voice behind the closed door of the office, but he paid it no mind. He was immersed in all that was before him. He intended to move along, to see Asher's other works, but he remained at the drawing of the woman, obedient to his conviction that it was better to see one thing well than many poorly.

He became conscious of a sound down the hall — a chair sliding on the floor — and could tell from the intonation of Asher's voice that the phone call was winding down. Moments later, the office door opened.

"Theo, I'm sorry that took so long."

"Oh, I could not have been more pleased. I feel like I'm swimming in an ocean of stories, even if I don't know what they are." He nodded at

the feather, the page with the single word circled, and the others.

Asher chuckled. "Well, you're right; they all *do* have a story, even if I'm the only one interested in them."

Theo said, "Ah, my guess is that many would be interested. The mind of the artist is a place of fascination to most of us, you know. All that mystique and all those visions. But maybe some of the stories are best kept in the vault of secrets, yes?"

Theo knew that vault well.

"Sometimes I wonder about all that talk about mystique," Asher replied. "The artistic temperament and such. I mean, I know there's such a thing, but if an artist has a family, he learns that art has to wait its turn sometimes. Housework and skinned knees and soccer games do wonders for keeping one's feet on the ground around here. There's not much mystique to being a member of a family."

Asher chuckled. "But I do have to admit, mystique, even if it's a pretense, can be helpful for business, can't it? I think sometimes that serious art buyers aren't very interested in paintings by someone as ordinary and unmysterious as me. Maybe if I were a little more brooding, buyers would take my art more seriously."

Theo grinned. In such a short time, the elderly man and the young artist were talking like old friends. They remained standing in the entrance hallway.

"I don't mean to be impolite," the gentleness of Theo's voice dispelled any chance of that possibility, "but would you tell me about these?"

He nodded and gestured toward the painting of the lone tree in the field and the four framed letters.

Asher nodded. "I'll try. The letters are easy. When I was a little boy, I told my mom I wanted to be an artist. Somehow, she got the addresses of these famous guys and helped me write letters to them. I can't imagine what I said, but those three responded. The fourth is from her father, my granddad. He didn't give much credence to the notion of artistic temperament and could be pretty hard on my mother at times, but he was really nice in his letter to me.

"My hunch is that she wrote cover letters and put them in with mine. She was a great encourager. I think every obscure artist, which is most of us, needs at least one of those. Anyway, she had these letters framed

for me when I graduated from art school. It feels a bit like name dropping to have them here, but, really, they say more about her than about the artists who wrote them.

"I had the idea once that, if I ever made a mark in the art world, I'd write those guys to tell them how their letters helped me. I'm not even sure they're alive anymore, and I surely haven't made a mark in the art world."

"Asher, I'm sure they would be very pleased with what you've accomplished."

"Thank you for saying so."

Theo pointed to the painting. "And the tree in the field?"

"Yeah, that one is a bit of a mystery. It was one of Mom's favorites, but she would never tell me much about it. You see the inscription here? 'Me, painting you, painting'? I don't know who the 'me' or the 'you' are, but it's nicely done, don't you think?"

Theo nodded. "It is. Do you think she might be the girl at the easel?"

"Funny you should say so. That's my theory, but whenever I asked her about it, she just laughed and said she would neither admit nor deny the allegation. Once when I asked her, she pulled her dress above her knees and said, 'Do these legs look like those?' So who knows? It was certainly *like her* to stand in a field painting. I just don't know the when or where or why of this one.

The two men stood for a matter of seconds studying the small painting.

"How about another cup of coffee?"

They returned to their chairs and, for the next couple of hours, shared a sprawling, meandering conversation, in which a random word or phrase would trigger another story and another, ad infinitum. Theo offered more than once to leave so that Asher could work, but the artist asserted his independence, claiming that, as his own boss, he could work whenever he wanted.

"This conversation *is* my work today," he said.

As part of that work, Asher tried to learn details of Theo's life. But, just as Shep and Tony and Minnette had discovered, the old man proved to be an artful dodger. It was Theo who continued to ask most of the questions, and it was the young artist who was somehow lured into giving long, revealing answers.

For instance, "Asher, how did you settle on portraits as a specialty?"

Asher nodded. "Well, I had just gotten out of school; undergrad, master's, doctorate. I had lots of education, but I didn't have any customers.

Unlike Mr. Van Gogh, I was hoping to sell some of my work *before* I died. And, as I mentioned, I've always liked to draw people.

“There used to be a little restaurant called the Magnolia a couple of miles from here in an upscale part of the city. It was where lots of the well-to-do women in town used to eat lunch after their morning bridge games. My mother was friends with the young couple who owned the place. Well, that couple had twins, a boy and a girl. I had just gotten back to town and my mom, God bless her, volunteered me to do a portrait of them. But she insisted that the owners hang the portrait in the restaurant, right behind the cash register, for at least a month before taking it home.

“So, I did the portrait, delivered it, and helped the owners hang it properly. Even that little bit of self-promotion was uncomfortable for me, but by the time I got home, five calls and five commissions were waiting for me. I was elated. Mom was too. I suspect she had something to do with those five phone calls, since they all came from family friends. That’s about the closest I’ve come to ‘marketing’ myself, even after all these years. Mom’s strategy worked. The calls never stopped after that. So, there you have it. The story of Asher, the portrait artist.

“Now, Theo, let me ask you a question. I’m doing too much of the talking. Really, why are you buying the portraits at the Chalice? I’m grateful, but I’m curious too. Do you know the people whose portraits you’re buying?”

Theo shared the explanation, the mysterious impulse, behind his purchases. He was good at telling his story by then.

“No, I don’t know the people. I don’t meet them until I give them their portraits. But before I deliver the portraits, I look, look, look at them. Don’t laugh, Mr. Asher — excuse me, Asher — but sometimes when I eat my meals at home alone, I bring a picture to the table and set it across from me. And while I eat, I study that face.”

Theo tapped his forehead. “Maybe I am a crazy old man? Voílà! But by the time I meet them at the fountain, I feel as if I know them, at least a bit. That’s why I find your work so interesting. It’s as if you make it possible to look not merely *at* the face but *through* the face, to the heart of the person. To the possibility of the person.

“I’m certain that some of the people see themselves clearly for the first time when they look at your drawings of them. I wish you could be there when I give them their portraits. It’s so wonderful.”

“Well, Theo, that’s awfully nice of you, but I have a hunch it’s *your* words that are bringing the portraits to life. Some of them have been on the wall, speechless, for months, and nobody seemed terribly moved by them. From what I can tell, you take them down, cast a spell on them, and, all of a sudden, they have something to say. My niece, Minnette, sure thinks so.”

Theo shook his head. “Asher, it would please me greatly if that were the case, but I think you give me too much credit. I simply help people sit still long enough to see what is already there.”

He took a sip of lukewarm coffee, gathered his thoughts, and then returned to Asher’s question. “But why? You ask me why I do it? Well, as I have said, I feel as if the idea came from elsewhere, as if it was given to me. But regardless, I’m certain, now more than ever, that giving the portraits is a good and loving thing to do. That is a more than adequate reason to do it. Asher, I can’t do what you do, but I can make sure that what you do fulfills its purpose. I confess that at first I did it hoping to make someone else happy. Now I fear that my reasons are almost entirely selfish. I do it because it brings such happiness to me. I don’t know if I’ve ever done anything I enjoy more, and I’m just beginning.”

Asher nodded pensively and smiled. “I’m happy it makes you happy. Which portraits have you bought so far?”

“Just a few, but I have only been here a short while, you know. Minnette, Kendrick, Frankie, some others. I’ll do another tomorrow. I’m thankful you write their names on the back of the frames. It helps me find them. So, only a few thus far, but if I have my way, and if I live long enough, I will empty the Chalice. You just keep working, young man. I’ll buy all the ones there now and then any others you put in their place. At my age, what good is money in the bank?”

Asher said, “Your kindness is not just a gift to them, you know. It means a lot to me.” He paused. “You know, when Shep and Addie and I came up with the idea of putting some art in the Chalice, and I started the portraits, I thought they would sell quickly, like jump-off-the-walls quickly. I priced them really low so that people could afford them. Some of the people I’ve drawn probably don’t have money to buy their pictures — you know, like students and homeless folks — but I know a

lot of the others pretty well, and they spend more on a single meal or a concert ticket than the portraits cost. If I'm honest, the project has been a little bit discouraging. I've wondered at times if Shep just doesn't have the heart to pull the plug on it."

Asher grimaced. "Gosh, Theo, I'm sorry. I know I must sound like I'm whining. I usually just share my frustrations with Brooke. Seems like unmet expectation is one of the hazards of this line of work. From what I can tell, lots of artists and creatives, especially little-known artists, wrestle with it."

The old man struck a sympathetic tone. "No need to apologize. I think all of us wrestle with those feelings about one thing or another. Unmet expectations have a clever way of showing up at every stage of life. I appreciate your candor."

"Theo, have you met Basil yet? The guy who plays guitar on the sidewalk near the Chalice?"

Theo's eyebrows arched upward. "So, that's his name? I can hear him from my balcony, but I haven't met him. Basil, like the herb?"

"Yeah, Basil Cannonfield. His portrait's in the Chalice. Anyway, he told me one time about his life as a musician, about how disappointing and embarrassing and pointless it feels to work so hard for tip money. He's really good if you ask me. But I know how he feels. My work is more stable and predictable than his — at least I have something tangible I can put a price tag on and sell — but the life of an artist can be pretty deflating at times. It can make you want to cut your ear off."

They both laughed.

"Maybe you could look at it this way, Asher. If your expectations had worked out as you'd hoped, I would have been denied a great gift. I would never have had the pleasure of buying the portraits, of having meals with the subjects, of finding the people and meeting them at the Fedder. I would never have had the chance to tell them something good and true about themselves. Some wonderful conversations would have been unspoken.

"Perhaps, when you were drawing the portraits, you were drawing them for me, even though you didn't know me yet. There is a mysterious choreography at work in our lives, yes? Talk about mystique! And now our paths have crossed and we get to do this

together. For my sake, selfish as it might seem, I'm sorry for your discouragement, but I'm very happy that the portraits did not sell before I got here."

Asher smiled.

When Theo finally stood to leave, the slanted light of early morning had become the vertical rays of early afternoon. His legs, a bit stiff from sitting for so long, required some stretching and rubbing before he and Asher walked past the framed letters and the painting of the lone tree in the hallway. They shook hands with a firmness that indicated a desire to seal their new friendship. Each put a free hand on the other's upper arm and looked one another in the eye. Something deeper than words passed between them.

"Asher, I thank you so very much."

"And I thank you, Theo. Let's do this again sometime soon."

They stepped out of the house onto the porch. Asher walked Theo down the steps, an act of respect and affection, patted him on the back, and then re-entered the house. The old man opened the gate, turned onto the sidewalk, blinked hard, and walked to the river.

There was, and would be, much to ponder.

Much to cherish.

Much to lament.

CHAPTER 23

About the name.

Or, more specifically, the absence of the name. Theo's last name.

The short answer is that folks just gave up caring about it. Once it became clear Theo wanted to be known by his first and only his first name, most of his new acquaintances capitulated to his wish.

He was a Houdini at evading personal questions and answering only those that were within certain unstated boundaries. The others he sidestepped with the finesse of a river dancer.

It was the same with attempts to learn his last name.

His habitual introduction, "Just call me Theo," was usually sufficient to circumvent further questions, especially for people who only encountered him once. At the bestowals, for instance.

If someone *did* ask for a last name, he usually repeated the habitual introduction with such friendly assertiveness that people didn't ask again. They would have felt impolite doing so.

When pressed, Theo responded with a rambling explanation that confused or exhausted his interrogator into submission.

"I have a strange and difficult Portuguese name that is long and hard to say, so just call me Theo, and I will call you Dan, and that way you won't have to try to pronounce that hard word because we have some unusual vowels in my country and so, and so . . . Dan, what sort of work do you do, and have you lived here in Golden all your life?"

And then he would be off and running.

Some of the most insistent, like Tony and Shep, pushed hard to get Theo's elusive surname, but even they finally gave up trying. They hoped he might share an email address or use a credit card someday that might provide a clue as to his full identity.

But Theo didn't use email or have a presence on social media that they could find. Likewise, he never used a credit card with his name on it while he was in Golden. Mr. Ponder, who handled all of Theo's business, including his mail, finances, and internet accounts, had taken steps to protect his client's anonymity. Theo had a single credit card

that was in the name of “PH Ltd.” No clues there.

So, eventually, people’s curiosity simply dried up. As they spent more and more time around him, they cared less and less about the second half of his name. If he didn’t want to share it, for whatever reason, well, so be it.

The fact that he was associated with and even lived in the office building of Mr. James Ponder gave him credibility and standing that he might never have earned on his own.

Mr. Ponder’s single statement, “Mr. Theo is a fine gentleman,” was more than enough to assure most Goldenites that Theo was a man above reproach, whether he had one name or three or ten.

The unspoken consensus of the neighborhood was that he would be judged by his fruits, by what could be seen with their own eyes. And soon, by those standards — demeanor, speech, generosity — those who knew him became convinced that, whoever he was, Theo could be trusted.

No last name.

Aside from that quirk, they were certain he was just like them, an average law-abiding citizen, only older and better.

Or so they thought.

CHAPTER 24

Whenever a portrait was sold and removed from the Chalice, another one, from inventory kept in Shep and Addie's office, was put in its place. Within minutes, a face would be freed from storage and brought into public view.

Theo greeted those newcomers enthusiastically. Each one meant another name, another story, and another thread for the living tapestry he was weaving with the bestowals.

What *did* become obvious early on was that, at the rate of one a week, it would take almost two years to depopulate the Chalice wall of its then-present occupants. Concluding there was no good reason to limit himself in that way, Theo resolved to increase the frequency of his giftings. He could do at least two, maybe three, each week. He had the time, the desire, and the money.

It was Mrs. Gidley who most felt the effects of Theo's accelerated activity. Addresses of recipients could be difficult to find, especially when Asher used nicknames on the back of the portraits. It took considerable sleuthing, for instance, to ascertain that "Chard" Dellamore was actually Richard or that "G Dawg" Salter was actually Brian.

Mr. Ponder volunteered to hire additional help, but Mrs. Gidley quickly shot down the proposal. By now, she was fully invested in Theo's "silly idea."

After stepping up the frequency of bestowals, Theo's apartment was inhabited at any given time by three, four, or as many as half a dozen faces, propped up on the couch, leaning on a windowsill in the kitchen, or looking down from a bookshelf. And his calendar began to fill up with appointments. Tuesday, Bob, seven o'clock. Thursday, Hendley, seven o'clock. Monday, Ahmad, seven o'clock. He spent a portion of most days at his dining room table, handwriting invitation letters for Mrs. Gidley to deliver.

One bestowal presented a unique challenge: Ellen.

Even though she was a regular presence on the Promenade, she had

no address to which a letter could be mailed.

Shep told Theo what little he knew about her. “She’s homeless, but I think she stays at the Mission sometimes. I’ve heard she sleeps under the bridge a lot and who knows where else.” Shep chuckled and shook his head. “Asher had a devil of a time getting a photograph of her. She kept talking about the goons from Columbia, whoever they are, and he could hardly get her to sit still. He had to take her picture at one of the tables outside. She’s an interesting person. You want me to try to find her for you?”

“I would like to get a letter to her,” Theo explained. “Do you know if she can read?”

“She’s pretty private, and I can’t say I’ve talked to her all that much. She never actually comes inside the shop. She doesn’t want to leave her bicycle alone. But somebody bought her a cup of hot chocolate one day and took it to her. Now she’ll just come and stand at the window till we see her. We always take her a cup of hot chocolate.

“Sometimes she’s on another planet, but other times she’s pretty clear-headed. I’ve seen books on her bicycle before, and I think she reads them. If you give me the letter, I’ll try to give it to her next time I see her. She passes by here pretty often.”

“Do you know her last name?”

On the back of her portrait, Asher had simply written “Ellen.”

The barista shook his head. “I’ve never heard anyone say her full name. She’s always just been ‘Ellen’ to me.” Shep raised his eyebrows. “All she has is a first name. Kind of weird, isn’t it?”

They both laughed.

Theo left the letter with Shep. It was shorter than others he had sent and was written with the simplest of words and the shortest of sentences.

Dear Ellen,

Mr. Glissen, the artist, drew a very nice picture of you. I saw it in the Chalice, the coffee shop near the fountain. I bought your portrait and would like you to have it. It is a gift. You do not have to pay anything for it or do anything in exchange. If you will, please meet me at the

fountain this Thursday at four o'clock in the afternoon, and I will deliver it to you.

Your portrait, with all its details, are quite beautiful. I am an old man. I will be wearing a green hat.

I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,
Theo

Even so simply written, the letter, Theo thought, might be too difficult or possibly intimidating for the unconventional recipient. He was pleased to learn that Shep had not only delivered the letter but also read and explained it to her. She clearly understood it and had only asked Shep to clarify the date and time she was to be at the Fedder. Shep was cautiously optimistic that Ellen would show up and more than a little interested in how the introduction might unfold.

In anticipation of the meeting, Theo spent considerable time studying the woman's portrait. Her head tilted slightly forward and down, as if reluctant to look into the camera, as if trying not to be noticed. There was a bashfulness about her attempted smile but clearly, hers was a face that had suffered loss. It bore the road wear and troubling scars of hard-fought survival. The eyes — heavy lids above and flaccid circles below — were tired and unfocused and, even on the page, seemed to be darting about. The skin on her face was furrowed, a swath of corduroy from crown to neck. Her bottom lip protruded, bulldoggish, beyond her upper lip and hinted that she might be missing teeth. Her hair, pulled back and held in place by some hidden means, was wiry and windblown, rebellious against any efforts toward grooming. A bandana hung loosely around her neck.

Theo questioned the wisdom of his decision to give her a portrait — *where would she even keep such a thing*? — but as the time for their meeting approached, he found himself anticipating this bestowal more eagerly than any of the previous ones.

He had scheduled his appointment with Ellen for o'clock assuming that ample daylight would lessen any apprehension she might feel about meeting a stranger.

The afternoon was cloudy with a chance of rain — another reason she might not show — but Theo put on his hat, grabbed his large umbrella, and walked to the rendezvous.

As he approached the Fedder a full half hour before the designated time, he saw her. She was already sitting on the bench, her bicycle within arm's reach.

If Theo had arrived *two hours* earlier, he might have witnessed her arrival at the fountain. He would have seen her riding her bicycle, barefoot, from the direction of the Mission. He would have also seen her walk the bicycle to the Fedder, remove a pair of knee-length socks and red high-heel shoes from one of her several plastic bags, and sit to put them on. He would have noticed that she looked around frequently as the clock inched toward four.

The Ellen that Theo finally did see as he approached their meeting was far different from the one in the portrait.

She was wearing a dress, one that she had carefully chosen from the clothing pantry at a homeless shelter. It was the color of wheat, no doubt some wealthy donor's act of charity, that buttoned at the neck and reached just below her knees. A scarf with a floral motif, bright reds and golds, was draped around her neck and across her shoulders. She was a kaleidoscope whose every movement brought a shifting pattern of color. She was also wearing thick layers of rouge and cherry-red lipstick and a peacock-blue wide-brimmed velvet hat. It might have been elegant once upon a time and fashionable, but now it was a shapeless, vaudevillian relic, a wilted halo.

It appeared that some attempt might have been made to style her hair, possibly even curl it, before putting on the hat. The attempt was less than successful.

When Ellen saw the green hat walking her way, she sat up straight, patted the lap of her dress with both hands, and watched with riveted eyes as Theo approached. Before he could say anything, and while he was still several steps away, Ellen held up an envelope.

"No man has ever sent me a handwritten letter before."

It was stated as a simple declaration, maybe even an appreciation, without hostility or ill will.

Theo stepped forward until he was close enough to touch her. He

smiled warmly and tipped his hat. “Well, then, I’m happy to be the first.” He bowed slightly, as if addressing royalty. “Ellen, it’s very nice to meet you.”

She fidgeted and seemed to be on the verge of saying something but then hesitated, as if she’d forgotten lines in a script. Finally, she spoke.

“Oh, now I remember. Do you like my hat?”

Theo nodded approvingly. “It’s lovely. Blue is one of my favorite colors. There are so, so many shades of blue. I think the artists call this one cerulean blue.”

“How do you know me?” Ellen asked.

Theo discerned already that the ensuing conversation might well be a runaway train of non sequiturs. He was undaunted and pleased that Ellen had shown up at all. Apparently, she had attached some importance to the meeting.

“Ellen, I only know you because of your portrait. I saw it at the Chalice recently with all the others. Have you seen it before?”

Instead of answering, she tapped the envelope containing Theo’s letter with her index finger. She followed that gesture with a statement, pronouncing each word precisely, as if to make a point.

“‘Your portrait, with all its details, *are* quite beautiful.’ You said ‘are’ in your letter.”

She removed the single page from the envelope, unfolded it, and held it up to Theo. “Look. The subject and the verb in that sentence don’t agree. If you take out the dependent clause, it should read ‘The portrait *is* quite beautiful.’ I don’t mean to be rude, but we try to use correct grammar.”

Theo looked at the letter, found the offensive sentence, processed Ellen’s observation, and nodded in agreement. “Well, well, you are exactly right. I stand corrected. Thank you. And yes, my grammar leaves much to be desired.” He looked again at the letter. “Yes, of course . . . the portrait *is* . . . of course.” He noted to himself that the woman had an educated mind, even if it was untethered. And he chided himself for making assumptions about her in advance.

She spoke again with unfiltered abruptness. “Are you a foreigner?”

”I am, but I have lived in your country for many years. My home is now up north.”

“Atlanta is north of here. Are you documented?”

Theo nodded again, smiling and on the verge of laughter. “Yes, I’m documented.”

Ellen nodded at the space beside her. “Well, then, do you want to sit down? I know it’s hard for old people to stand up for very long.”

Theo chuckled, then stepped forward and sat beside Ellen, careful to leave some room between them.

He was about to ask her a question, hoping he might be able to steer their dialog in a somewhat coherent direction, but he was too slow.

“You look like a Jew,” she said, looking him full in the face. “So, I want to ask you something. Could Jesus eat pork? He was a Jew, you know. And people down here love barbecue.”

Theo did not make light of the question. He looked into the fountain, pondering his reply before responding with slow, deliberate words. “That . . . is . . . a very . . . interesting . . . question. I’ve never thought about it. What do you think? Could the Messiah eat pork?”

Her head wobbled at the ridiculousness of the question. “I think he could do anything he damn well pleased. You know who he was, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve read all about him and I—”

“But he could change things too. You do know he changed water into wine, don’t you? So, if he wanted to, he could pick up a piece of pork and change it to fish right before it went into his mouth. Or even while he was chewing it.”

Theo nodded in agreement and then attempted a diversionary turn.

“Ellen, thank you for coming to meet me. I just moved to Golden a few weeks ago, and I don’t know many people here yet, so I’m happy for the chance to make a new friend.”

Ellen blushed and smiled, a lazy grin under sleepy eyes. She sat up straight and patted her dress. “I’ve never gotten a handwritten letter before. Your penmanship is immaculate. The coffee man gave it to me.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Shep. He helped me out. Since I couldn’t find a mailing address, I didn’t know how to deliver it.”

Theo winced inwardly, afraid he might have inadvertently and rudely brought her homelessness into the conversation, but she appeared unbothered and gladly explained her situation.

“Well, I sort of live in different places, since I’m homeless. But sometimes I stay at the Mission. Are you from Israel?”

Theo’s laugh was audible this time. “No. Actually, I grew up in Portugal, in a small town near Porto.”

“They have Jews in Portugal?”

“No, no. I mean, yes, there are Jewish people in Portugal, and some are very dear to me, but I am not Jewish myself.”

“Well, then, do you go to a church building?”

“I do. In fact, you see that low steeple over there?” Theo pointed to the barely visible top of a spire a couple of blocks away. “Sometimes I go to that church building on Sunday mornings.” He had pointed at St. James, a landmark known for its opulent windows and ivy-covered exterior walls.

“That’s right next to the post office, isn’t it?” Ellen said. “I’ve never been inside there before. Have you read Eudora Welty?”

“I have indeed.” Theo did not make the connection until later that Mrs. Welty had written a popular story about a post office. “But Ellen, could you tell me a bit about your bicycle?”

She dropped her forehead again and tucked her chin into her chest, so she had to roll her eyes upward to look him in the face. She seemed somewhat offended.

“Mr. Theo, I hardly even know you. I’m sorry, but I can’t really trust you with my personal information yet.”

Theo placed his hand over his heart, supplicating her. “Oh, please forgive me. It was very inappropriate of me to ask a question like that. I’m so sorry.”

In response to Theo’s apology — Ellen was not used to such deference — her chin lifted, and her eyes relaxed.

“It’s really not that big a deal. And since you seem sort of lonely, I’ll just go ahead and tell you. My bicycle is called the ‘Noble Invention.’ Do you know William Saroyan?”

Theo frowned. “I don’t believe I do.”

“Well, he’s dead anyway. But you should know him. You look sort of like him except for his big mustache. He was a writer from California. He was Armenian.”

“Ah, yes, that William Saroyan.” Theo was struck by Ellen’s literacy

and surmised, correctly, that books were her language, her neighborhood, her connection to reality.

“Well, Mr. Saroyan said ‘the bicycle is the noblest invention of man.’ And in ‘Rescue the Perishing,’ that story, the little boy did not want a new bicycle. He liked the one he had. It cost him $27.50 of his own money. Well, I don’t want a new bicycle either. The Mission tried to give me one, some old thing made in China. No, sir, don’t even think about it. I like mine perfectly fine. Can you ride a bicycle, or are you too old?”

Theo chuckled once again at her candor.

“Ellen, I will have you know that, as a boy, I rode my bicycle many times from Pinhão to Lamego and once all the way from Pinhão to Porto. It has been a long time, but maybe I should try again. Maybe you could teach me.”

Her eyes registered doubt. “Well . . . maybe. You’re pretty old, and I don’t want to get sued. Ambulance chasers are everywhere these days. Probably bicycle chasers too.”

Theo tsked three times before responding.

“Yes, that is a problem. But I promise not to sue you if something happens. How did you get your bicycle?”

“I found it at the Promenade. It was just lying there on the sidewalk, totally neglected. There was this skinny little kitten beside it too. I waited for an hour. I don’t know whose it was, but I said, ‘Well, if I’m going to take care of your cat, I’m taking your damn bicycle too.’ When the kitten got bigger, it ran away. A dog would never do that.

“I’ve had the Noble Invention for ten years. Every day for ten years, we’ve been together. That’s longer than a lot of marriages. Everything I own is on my bike. Travel light. Like Mother Teresa. Did you see ET? He rode his bike all the way to heaven. That’s what I plan to do. Are you somebody important?”

With that, the weave and bob of their conversation continued. No single line of thought held for more than a few sentences. As soon as Theo thought they were on a similar wavelength, she would inject an altogether unrelated idea, at least from his perspective, and move into uncharted territory. But he was neither frustrated nor unsettled by this tendency. Not in the least. He accommodated, as best he could,

whatever change of direction she proposed and accepted that he would have to learn about her in bits and pieces.

He did eventually get around to the portrait, which had been sitting on the bench between them as they talked.

“Ellen, I don’t mean to take so much of your time.”

“Don’t be sorry. I don’t have anywhere to be.”

“Well, here is the portrait that I promised you. Would you like to see it?”

She nodded hesitantly, bottom lip prominently forward. Her eyes were fixed on his hands as he unwrapped the picture. Paper gone, he rested the frame on his knee so that Ellen could see her likeness.

Her reaction at first was subdued, as if sizing up a strange dog to make sure it was safe. She gazed, tilted her head, and then smiled timidly, good-naturedly, satisfied the dog was nothing to be afraid of. She approved.

“Do you think it’s nice?” she asked.

“I do think the portrait, with all its details, is lovely.”

Ellen straightened up once again and patted her dress. For a stretch of seconds, she sat with her hands on her knees, studying the face in the frame. Theo held it out to her, and she accepted it with the gentleness of a mother receiving a child for the first time. She continued to gaze, sometimes pulling it close to observe a detail, more than once touching the glass as if to feel skin, cheekbone, hair.

“Ellen, when I first saw your portrait, I asked myself, what is this person like? And I thought, she is a most interesting person. In her eyes . . .”

She immediately focused on that part of the drawing.

“In her eyes I saw someone who is wise and tested. I think she is very strong but very motherly too. Yes, very motherly.”

Ellen turned her face toward Theo, lowered her forehead again in what was obviously her gesture of thoughtfulness, and stared into his eyes. He continued speaking, trusting that some of what he said made sense and hoping that none of it offended her.

“I think that some people misunderstand her, but she is a good woman, a kind woman, a woman with a tender heart. She could be a saint, this woman. It is in her, I’m sure. This could quite possibly

be a portrait of St. Ellen of the Promenade. Do you like it?”

She nodded. Then she began to speak to an unidentified “you.” “Well, you always said I had a crooked nose. Here’s your proof, framed for all the world to see.”

Her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

A raindrop, and then another, fell onto the frame. Ellen covered it quickly with the wrapping paper, reached for her bike, and grabbed a plastic bag, of which she had an abundance. She wrapped the portrait carefully as Theo raised his umbrella over their heads. The rain stopped after a few seconds, but the clouds remained heavy and threatening.

“Ellen, if you need to be somewhere, please don’t let me keep you too long.”

“Where would I need to be? I’m homeless.”

She said it in good humor. And Theo, realizing she wanted to be there at least a little while longer, took a chance on real conversation.

“Ellen, do you have a favorite color?”

“Yes, I do. Blonde. Like a little girl’s hair.”

“Ah, yes, that *is* a beautiful color. Have you noticed sometimes the sunrise is blonde, and the dogwood blossoms are blonde? And the fellow who plays his guitar on the sidewalk? Mr. Basil, I think. Would you say his guitar is blonde? A blonde guitar?”

His voice softened. “I know a special little girl with blonde hair. I told her once upon a time that she spread gold dust into the air every time she brushed her hair.” He paused. “Yes, blonde is a beautiful color.”

Ellen listened as if in a spell, her face turned ever so faintly toward

him.

At one point she pulled a necklace from beneath the collar of her dress, unclasped it, and held it in her free hand. She was silent for a matter of seconds. There was something akin to peacefulness, at least for a moment, in her face.

And then Theo asked a simple question. “Ellen, did you grow up here in Golden?”

As if he had touched a lit match to a fuse, Ellen’s face grew tense and agitated. The fragile peacefulness that “blonde” had ushered in was suddenly and inexplicably gone. Ellen had stepped on some mental landmine that triggered an avalanche of incoherent thought.

She looked over her shoulder with short, convulsive movements, as if dodging bullets, and clenched the tip of her tongue between her teeth.

Her lip bent into a snarl, and her eyes blinked in spastic fits and starts as she launched into a rambling, disjointed narrative of short, incomplete sentences. Her fingers fidgeted and pulled at the fabric of her dress. Her voice took on the frightened tone of a victim recounting a crime, dry-mouthed and breathless. She never answered Theo’s question, but she made reference, in no discernible order, to the war in Vietnam, a grandmother who was a fortune teller, a policeman, a nurse who gave her an Easter basket, Carson McCullers, the price of housing insulation, someone named William, and the goons from Columbia.

Her stream of consciousness had taken only a couple of minutes, but by the time Ellen finally went silent, it felt as if the air around the Fedder had been entirely depleted. Spittle had gathered at the corners of her mouth. Her tongue moved aimlessly over her lips as if seeking a place to rest. She stared into the middle distance.

An uncomfortable silence followed. Theo had no idea how to safely resume their conversation, but finally, he spoke.

“Ellen, my dear. I know it must be hard to talk about.”

“Yes it is, actually, and if I were you, I certainly wouldn’t enlist. But if you do, don’t tell them your real name.”

More silence followed. Ellen’s hands quivered, and her head made small involuntary jerks — aftershocks — until, like a vehicle running out of fuel, she coasted slowly into stillness. The episode of sudden derangement — whatever it was — had left her winded and pale. She

took a deep breath and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Theo said nothing, in hopes that her excited thoughts would dissipate if disturbed no further.

Perhaps it was time to conclude their first conversation. And yet, Ellen seemed in no hurry to leave.

Theo wondered what he might say or do to draw her back to the present moment. Speaking barely above a whisper, he directed her attention to the portrait.

“Ellen, I think the artist did an excellent job of drawing your eyes.”

She removed the portrait from the plastic bag and looked again at her face in the frame. The avalanche appeared to be under control. Ellen’s head trembled involuntarily one last time, like a faintly disturbed bobblehead doll. She tapped the frame with her finger.

“I’ve seen a lot through those eyes. A thousand stories are in those eyes. Yours too.”

She looked at Theo sideways. “One time, those eyes saw a little boy fall into this fountain. He had on a blue shirt, and he wanted some money. So, he leaned over, but his legs were too short, and he fell in. He cried and didn’t even get any money. His mommy and daddy were with him. And when they pulled him out, they laughed and were so sweet to him. I went in the water and got him two quarters. And we all laughed. Except the little boy.”

The fog in Ellen’s mind continued to lift as she told the story, and an awkward, lethargic grin lightened her countenance. Her hands rested on the portrait.

“Ellen, you’re a good storyteller. You know, I like to sit at places like this and think about all the people who’ve walked and sat and talked here. There must be lots of stories about Broadway. People everywhere seem to like fountains.”

Theo was thinking Paris and Rome, Central Park and Rio. Ellen looked at the ground around her feet.

“Mr. Theo, do you think I’m nice? Am I making a good first impression? Mrs. Ocie Van Blarcum has been helping me with that. She helped me pick out this dress.” Ellen patted the blonde fabric.

She felt Theo’s smile without even looking his way.

“I do indeed. You are very nice to sit with an old man like me.” He

meant it.

Ellen's gaze returned to the portrait. "Do you think my nose is a little crooked? Be honest."

"I think your nose is just right. And noses that are crooked can be much more interesting than straight ones anyway. Crooked noses have stories."

"Kind of like crooked people," Ellen quipped. She laughed at her play on words. Theo was struck by her profundity and chuckled along with her. He searched his mind for a question that would gain entrance to hers without setting off the rockslide again. He imagined a sensitive set of scales in her psyche that could shift from tenuous sanity to utter disorder in a second.

He decided to take a chance.

"Ellen, the story of the little boy is a happy story. Could you tell me another one? Or maybe this: could you tell me about . . . the happiest day of your life?"

CHAPTER 25

Theo's question triggered a transformative silence, a short span during which Ellen's face relaxed and softened. Her shoulders and chest, previously slumped and tired, straightened. Her neck likewise lost its weary curvature and held her head aloft, able, it seemed, at least for a while, to bear the weight of her burdened mind. That raising of her head aligned her jaw, restored her lower lip to its proper place, and gave her — blue hat and all — a certain nobility of bearing. She closed her eyes, raised her face skyward, and took a long, slow breath.

Theo saw none of this; his gaze was fixed on the Fedder, where raindrops had begun to fall, dimpling the pool's surface. He raised the large umbrella again, and Ellen edged close to his side. Their thighs met at the middle of the bench, and they sat safe beneath the dome of the parasol.

When she began to speak, it was with a voice that was soft, clear, and controlled. She had a storyteller's composure with no hint of affectation. Theo was tempted to look her way, to ensure that no doppelgänger had replaced the agitated homeless woman with whom he had been speaking only moments ago. She patted her dress and began her story.

"The happiest day of my life was April twelfth, thirty years ago this year. I was in Charleston, and it was raining. Not badly but a steady drizzle. The rhododendrons and crocuses were in bloom, and the gardens had been prepared for Easter. All through the old town and down near the Battery, there were peace lilies and narcissus. Even though I was in a very dark place in my life, the city was beautiful and full of light.

"William and I were looking for a place to sleep that night since we didn't have a home. I was extremely tired, and my feet and back hurt, so I sat on a bench to rest. I was afraid I might get picked up for vagrancy or something, but I had to rest. I had already been to mental twice, but I couldn't stay there anymore. That's why we were in

Charleston. William — he was my boyfriend — took me just like I was and helped me get out of Columbia. But we didn't have any money or food or family or jobs, and we were just trying to survive.

"It was eleven o'clock at night. I know because I heard the bells from the church. And then I heard a gunshot. I just knew that's what it was, and I knew it was William. He had gone to find us something to eat. I ran to where the noise came from, and there were some people who were upset and crying, but I never did hear what they were saying because I saw William on the ground. I fell onto him because it was still drizzling rain, and I didn't want him to get wet, which makes no sense because I knew he had been killed. Other people started to gather, and I was hysterical and went into labor."

Ellen paused but seemed neither anxious nor reluctant about the story she was telling. During the silence, Theo gazed into the Fedder and held the umbrella, fatherly, over their heads. He did very much wonder how, if at all, her account might circle around to the happiest day of her life.

"I honestly don't know much about what happened next, but somehow I got taken to a hospital. There were doctors and nurses all around. I was in labor for a long time, but finally my little girl was born. I saw her when they held her up for the first time, and I cried and I cried, mostly because I was happy to see her but also because of William."

Ellen was suddenly, but only momentarily, far, far away, in Charleston, on a drizzly night in April, looking at walls and surgical lights in a hospital maternity ward.

"They tested my blood and said it was dirty. But it wasn't; it was only starving. I was so afraid. And so tired. They took me to a room, and I slept a long time. And then when I woke up, there was a policeman in the room. He was a nice man. He could tell I was afraid and confused and that I didn't know what was happening to me. I think maybe he had a daughter, a teenager like me. He told me to rest, and I told him I wanted to see my baby. I wanted to hold her. When I said that, he looked so sad and just kept telling me to rest for now. I could tell he knew something he wasn't telling me. I begged him to please call the doctor and the nurse, so I could hold my little girl. I asked him why he

was there, and I said some ugly things to him. But he kept being nice to me and promised he was only there to help me. I just wanted to see my little girl, to hold her. Willa Francesca. That's her name, Willa Francesca."

The rain continued to sprinkle up and down the Promenade. Pedestrians were hugging the storefronts along Broadway, seeking the protection of awnings and balconies. Theo and Ellen were safe, dry, and immovable in the sanctuary of the umbrella. She continued her story, undeterred by the rain.

“I found out that the hospital people had gone through my book bag and found some papers from the mental in Columbia. Stupid of me to leave them in my book bag. The goons from Columbia were coming for me, and the nice policeman had been assigned to watch me, so I couldn’t escape again.

“I begged and begged to see my daughter. The doctors mostly didn’t care. Most of the nurses too. But the policeman cared. And one nurse. There was something different about them. I could tell they cared about me, and they knew I cared for my baby, even though I was only a messed-up kid myself. My room didn‘t have any windows, so I never knew what time of day it was. I tried not to fall back asleep even though they were giving me medicine to keep me calm and knock me out again.

“One time I did doze off, and when I woke up, the nurse and the policeman were in the room. They asked me to be real quiet. The nurse said, ‘Be real quiet so that you don’t wake up the baby,’ and she took my tiny little girl and laid her on my chest. That was the happiest day of my life. My little child lay there and slept. Her head and her hand were right on my heart, and I thought it would break; I was so happy. And I called her by her name. ‘Hello, Willa.’

“I don’t know how long I held her, but the nurse and the policeman seemed nervous. They both told me what a beautiful baby girl she was. The nurse finally said, ‘Let me take her, and let‘s be very gentle and quiet, so we don’t wake her up. I’ll bring her back later.’ That’s what she told me, but I think the nurse lied so I wouldn’t get upset. She knew what was going to happen. I kissed Willa on the cheek. That’s the last time I ever saw her.”

There was a long pause.

“I don’t know how long I was in the hospital, but when I left, the good nurse cried. She and the policeman gave me an Easter basket. This was one of the gifts in the basket.“

Ellen held out the necklace. A locket with floral etching in frosted gold dangled from the chain. She opened it carefully. A tiny lock of hair — blonde — was nestled in the bowl of the locket, like a sleeping fawn.

Neither she nor Theo uttered a word. They were silenced by the sacredness of the moment. Ellen finally whispered the child‘s name,

Willa Francesca. Then she closed the locket, clasped the necklace back in place, and rested her hands in her lap.

“I ended up back at the mental. They took her from me. I don‘t know who or how. Kidnapping by bureaucracy. And once they declare somebody like me crazy or unfit, they close the book forever. Mr. Theo, you can‘t imagine what it’s like to know there’s a child in this world who you love more than life, a child you’ll never see or touch again. You’ll never know how it hurts to be told you’re not mother enough to take care of your own child. There’s a little girl out there somewhere, my little girl, and I haven’t touched her in thirty years.”

Her soft voice grew even softer. “You will never know.”

More silence.

”I’m so sorry, Ellen, so sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Mr. Theo. It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not. But maybe yes. Ellen, the older I get, the more convinced I am that every hurt the world has ever known is somehow the fault of every person who ever lived. Maybe not directly and never entirely, but somehow, I fear, we own all of the world’s hurts together.”

Ellen nodded slightly. Whether it meant agreement or mere politeness, Theo didn’t know.

Their eyes were fixed on the Fedder, the mixture of rainfall and fountain water dancing in a filigree of silver. Streetlights along Broadway had begun to glow faintly to compensate for the cloud cover. The rain finally stopped.

“Mr. Theo, that was the worst thing I ever had to live through. But it was the happiest day of my life.”

And then, without speaking, she stood, straightened her bicycle, put her portrait in a basket between the handlebars, and turned to leave. She looked back toward the bench.

“Mr. Theo, a little while ago, you said when you looked at my picture, I looked ‘motherly,’ right? Is that really what you saw?“

Theo nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Theo.”

She wiped the rainwater from her cheek and rode away.

CHAPTER 26

On the following Sunday, a crisp, cloudless morning, Theo ate a small breakfast, stopped by the Chalice for a newspaper and a coffee, and then walked to St. James for the eleven o'clock gathering. A sign at the rear doorway asked for silence upon entry. As if to reinforce that request, a psalmic passage was written in elegant script, "Be still and know that I am God."

Theo entered the sanctuary and took a seat as others trickled in.

The architecture of the place inside and out was a celebration of lines and angles, of stone and wood and glass, of mundane materials used majestically in celebration of order and mystery.

It was a manifesto of beauty.

The designers had made a thousand small decisions to ensure the grandeur and wholeness of the finished work. How many souls had been stilled and comforted in that hallowed space over the decades?

Sitting there, Theo imagined the men who built the structure: the muscles and motives, the sweat and swearing, the tools and tempers that, taken together, had produced so remarkable an edifice. He pondered the stresses that held arches in place, those and other invisible forces that, properly understood and employed, brought grace and symmetry to such spaces.

He gave thought to the history contained in and represented by this single structure: the baptisms and burials, the marriages and messages, the hearts mournful and glad and bored and worshipful that had filled the long benches over the generations.

A reverent hush filled the room as the organist played a prelude to the morning's service. The music was conducive to contemplation, or sleep, depending on one's disposition at the moment.

As the last note of the song faded, Father Lundy rose to welcome the congregants and make his opening remarks. He had just begun reading a passage of scripture when, to the complete and utter shock of everyone present, a loud disturbance erupted at the back of the room. The sound of breaking glass, a falling vase, sounded through the high

rafters.

That shock was heightened when the words being spoken became audible and distinguishable.

“You get your blue blood hands off of me, you pin-striped whore of Babylon! Touch me again, and I’ll ride this Noble invention right over your hypocritical ass! Get out of my way!”

An usher, fighting an onset of total astonishment and embarrassment, was trying to restrain a wild-eyed woman wearing a blue hat from bringing her bicycle into the sanctuary. She had forced her way through the door, bicycle in tow, and was intent on joining the congregation assembled there.

Or, more precisely, intent on finding and joining Theo.

Every head turned her way. A number of the leaders and others moved immediately toward the disturbance and encircled the intruder. Any semblance of order or sanctity fled the room as Ellen, not to be deterred by another act of bureaucracy, railed against her opposition. She was equal parts prophet and whirling dervish.

“Your sign outside says ‘visitors welcome.’ Well, St. Smartass, I’m a visitor, so get out of my way. You touch my property one more time and see what happens, you throne-sniffing Pharisee. Get the hell out of my way! All of you. Right now!“

Her fist was raised and ready.

St. James had never experienced, and likely never would again, such a display of righteous indignation on its premises. Some of the congregation watched or ducked down cautiously behind their pews, horror-stricken at this unexpected visit from an uninvited guest. After all, there had been killings in churches in recent years. Others, who recognized the woman from having seen her around town, were curious and even amused that an actual sinner had entered the elegant premises of James, the saint. The biblically literate among them might have expected a finger to start writing on the wall at any moment: Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.

Panicked cell phone calls, many from the sanctuary floor, were made to 911 with the expectation that, in a matter of seconds or minutes, officers would arrive, arrest the troublemaker, and restore dignity to the meeting. In the meantime, Father Lundy implored parishioners to

remain seated and be calm. Few paid him any attention. The main event was clearly at the back of the sanctuary. Across the room, people gaped, craned their necks, and whispered excitedly about the scene unfolding before them.

And then came a voice.

“Darling. Ellen. Ellen, darling. Hello, dear. Good morning, dear.“ Mrs. Ocie Van Blarcum, her white hair shining like a nimbus, stepped between Ellen and the others and touched her hand. There was no sense of alarm or urgency in her voice. But her forceful presence made it abundantly clear who was now in charge.

Immediately, the confusion began to subside, affirmation that a gentle answer (still) turns away wrath.

“Ellen, please come sit with me, sweetheart. We’ll find a place for your bicycle. Would you like to sit with me and my family?”

Ellen stood silently for a moment, still defensive against the bodies that surrounded her. It took a moment and several hard blinks, but eventually a glimmer of recognition filled her gaze. Her hands relaxed.

“Hello, Miz Ocie.”

Mrs. Van Blarcum was a matriarch of St. James, a venerated and lifelong member whose family name was empaneled in the grand window that covered most of the sanctuary’s west wall. She knew well and lived devotedly the ethic of the eponymous James: “Faith without works is dead.” She was not merely capable of saintliness. She was saintly. Some would have argued she was a saint.

While she fit in comfortably in the highbrow world of St. James, Ocie Van Blarcum was no stranger to the soup lines and homeless shelters in Golden. She and Ellen had seen each other often at such places.

She understood the difference between “troubled mind” and “troublemaker,” and she recognized in Ellen all the signs of the former — a wounded soul, a lost sheep, a “least of these, my brethren.”

The sound of sirens had grown in strength until they were just outside the building. Clearly, more than one police vehicle had responded to the disturbance. Mrs. Van Blarcum instructed several of the ushers and vestry members, in a tone of voice that would not be defied, to tell the policemen to leave. Her eyes blazed with an authoritative “right nowness.”

“Ellen, come this way, darling. My family is right here. On that row. We have room for you.”

Ellen shook her head, “No, ma’am. I’m looking for Mr. Theo.”

At that moment, he smiled and stepped forward into the small space that belonged to Ellen and Mrs. Van Blarcum.

“And Mr. Theo has been looking for you,” he said cheerfully. “Good morning, Ellen.”

Theo and Mrs. Van Blarcum knew each other only vaguely. They had met on a previous Sunday and had crossed paths occasionally since then. Standing there together with Ellen, they were the embodiment of goodness and mercy. And for the moment, the room belonged not to Father Lundy but to Ocie and Theo, surrogate shepherds of the flock.

No one shaving or dressing or selecting shoes or watching television before driving to St. James earlier that morning would have guessed that a church service could be as engrossing as this one was shaping up to be.

No one could have anticipated the sight of an old man guiding a garishly attired homeless woman and her bicycle down the center aisle, eighth pew from the front, and helping her find a seat at the end of the row.

Ellen kickstanded the Noble Invention, sat and patted her blonde dress, touched her necklace, rested her hands in her lap, smiled at Theo, and then directed her attention to the pulpit.

Father Lundy began to speak. By then he had regained his composure. He knew a teachable moment when he saw one. He also knew that the congregation, if only they could see it, had just witnessed and participated in a sermon. Need he say more?

His voice was thick with emotion as he spoke. “Let us be silent and pause to reflect before we have our morning prayer.”

The organist, in a stroke of musical eloquence, played a simple rendering of “All Things Bright and Beautiful” as a never-before, widely-enlarged sense of reverence filled the room. Some still looked at Ellen. Most, “the oldest first,” had redirected their attention away from the spectacle of her strange appearance and had turned their gazes inward.

One could almost hear the sound of stones dropping to the ground.

After the morning service, it was agreed that, in the future, Theo would sit in the last row, on the outside aisle, so that when and if Ellen attended (which, in fact, she began to do regularly), her bicycle could be parked beside her. That way the Noble Invention would not impede movement up and down the center aisle when collection of the offering and celebration of Holy Communion took place. It was the practice at St. James to dispense the bread and the cup at the altar to all in the faith who were able to walk forward. After the first week, when Ellen insisted on wheeling her bike with her to the Communion rail, Theo was able to convince her that it would be safe at the pew. He and Mrs. Ocie would guard it.

He also encouraged Ellen to be on time for the service. She was never late again.

CHAPTER 27

By the time Theo made his first walk down Broadway early the next morning, the story of Sunday's drama was already in wide circulation.

When Tony first heard about it, he recognized it as the stuff of local legend. He was more than his usual animated self when he saw Theo approaching the Verbivore.

"Good morning, Mr. Theo! I hear the management over at St. James had quite a brouhaha yesterday morning, and you were right in the middle of it. For once, I wish I'd been in the house of worship. Tell me what happened, Theo."

Theo smiled. "Tony, my good fellow, it *was* a wonderful morning and I *do* wish you would join me there sometime."

It was hardly the answer that Tony had wanted. Something in Theo's expression suggested to Tony that the old man might not want to make light of anything pertaining to Ellen.

"Well, maybe I will visit sometime if you'll promise a morning as entertaining as yesterday must have been."

"Tony, it might actually be more shocking to all of us if *you* walk through the door."

"Touché! Touché!"

Laughter followed. Then Tony's voice and the look in his eyes turned serious. "Theo, really, tell me what happened. All I'm hearing is second and third hand."

Theo's tone and expression likewise lost its humor, but not its warmth, as he told Tony both stories: the Thursday afternoon bestowal at the Fedder and the Sunday morning disruption at St. James. In doing so, his references to Ellen were never deprecating, discourteous, or demeaning. Nor were his references to the parishioners or the clergy of St. James.

Theo told the story of Sunday, in fact, as if the occurrence were nothing out of the ordinary, as if he didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about. He had, after all, seen lots of Ellens in New York

City.

As Theo spoke, Tony listened with an occasional nod, an articulation of understanding (“uh huh”), a pursing of the lips, or a raising of the brow. A time or two, he said “really,” more as an exclamation than a question. He puffed on his cigarette. Given that Tony actually had been inside St. James more than once, usually for funerals, he could picture the scene of the disturbance frame by frame in his bookish, cinematic mind. And despite his wry wit and tendency toward irreverence, the incident came to life in his imagination more as romance than comedy.

“I’m glad you were there, Theo,” Tony said when Theo was finished. “That old girl’s had a tough go. I don’t know much about her, but I’m thinking she’s had some Vietnams of her own.”

The thought hung in the air between them before Tony continued. “She comes by here a lot. She loves to read. Did she tell you that? And some of it’s pretty deep stuff. She used to go to the library, but something or a lot of somethings happened, and they took her card away from her. I guess I can see the library’s side of it. She can really cause a scene when she wants to. I guess you saw that for yourself yesterday.”

Theo nodded knowingly. Tony continued.

“She scares the hell out of the children, too, and she smells pretty awful in the summertime. I think she piled up some hefty fines for overdue books, and she had some run-ins with the staff, so they put her out. Somebody told me it really upset her when they took her card away. They had to call the police to make her leave.”

Another short pause as Tony took a drag of his cigarette. His voice brightened as he carried on.

“So Theo, you know what we did? We gave her a library card to the Verbivore. She’s the only member. She can check out three books at a time and keep them for a month. There have only been a couple times she didn’t bring ‘em back. But she swears they disappeared. Probably got stolen or something.

“Theo, If you haven’t figured it out yet, the Promenade tries to keep an eye on her. She sort of belongs to all of us. You’ll get good reviews for helping her yesterday. Not that you did it for that reason, of course. You know I don’t buy all the ‘heaven’ stuff, but I do admit what

happened at St. James sounds sort of . . . well . . . you know . . .”

Theo said nothing, merely smiled.

“So, Theo, tell me one more time. That usher? What did she call him? St. Smartass? That’s what I heard. Man, I wish I’d been there. And what was the other one? Pin-striped whore of Babylon? Damn, I wish I’d been there. Where does she come up with that stuff? I bet the management is gonna have quite a meeting this morning. Uh, uh, uh.”

Tony took a long pull on his cigarette, careful to blow the smoke away from Theo.

And with that, the mischievous spark, never far from the surface, shone in Tony’s eyes again.

Before leaving the Verbivore that morning, Theo asked Tony if he had any books by William Saroyan in stock. He did, a thick paperback anthology, which Theo purchased for a few dollars.

Later that day at home, Theo found and read “Rescue the Perishing,” the story that Ellen had referenced in their conversation at the Fedder.

The little boy’s bicycle really did cost $27.50, and it was true that he did not want a new one. And Saroyan really did say, in another essay, that the bicycle is the noblest invention of man. His justification for that opinion? “Because I say so.”

CHAPTER 28

Basil Cannonfield strummed the final chords of a familiar Paul McCartney song, removed the coins and bills from his guitar case, gently laid his old Martin in the crushed velvet, then closed the latches and called it a day.

This was his workplace, a slice of sidewalk a few paces to the right of the Chalice entrance. He had chosen the spot because of its predictable foot traffic. It was there, three, four, and sometimes five nights a week, that he serenaded the pedestrians of Broadway. His open guitar case lay on the pavement beside him like a beggar's pleading maw. "Tips welcome."

On many nights from his balcony, Theo had listened, as best he could, to the street musician's songs. Even to his trained, cultured ear, the soulful, folksy voice was a pleasant addition to the sounds of the Promenade.

On a typical evening, most people walked by Basil without breaking stride. They were careful to avoid eye contact with him or even to look in his direction for fear that it might create an obligation to put something in the open case. Chalice patrons sitting at the tables on the sidewalk carried on conversations as if he were nothing more than piped-in background noise. Occasionally, someone actually did pay attention, or better, stopped and listened to a song or two.

Singing was a total-body experience for Basil Cannonfield. His shoulders rose and fell, his neck bobbed rhythmically, and his knees bent as feet tapped or shuffled vigorously in service of the songs. He was pulled like a marionette by the strings of music in his head.

From time to time, he smiled at a familiar pedestrian, even called them by name, and spoke or sang to them in the middle of a performance. It was hard to tell if he actually enjoyed the work, but there was no doubt he was fully engaged in it.

When Basil returned home that night, around eleven o'clock, he emptied his money pouch onto the kitchen table. This ritual was the agony and the ecstasy of working for tips. On good nights, when coins

were many but bills were more, the term “grand total” had a kingliness to it. On other, more ordinary nights, Basil could only be glad that his girlfriend, Katrina, had a steady job. On bad nights, he wondered if it might be time to return to his job as a schoolteacher at McLemore Elementary.

The night had been a good one. The traffic flow had been steady and strong and unusually generous. Springtime and Springsteen had a liberating effect on people’s wallets.

The evening harvest was mostly one-dollar bills, with a welcome complement of fives and tens.

But there was something else.

An envelope bearing his name, elegantly handwritten.

Earlier that evening, shortly after dark, Theo had left his balcony, walked downstairs to the sidewalk, and stood as covertly as possible listening to the music. In the middle of one particularly energetic song, Theo joined the scrum of pedestrians, walked past Basil, and dropped the envelope into the open guitar case. This time Theo would spare Mrs. Gidley the trouble of delivery.

Basil’s portrait: a young man in his thirties, tousled shoulder-length hair, thin scraggly beard, attempted mustache.

The face was lean and angular. If congruous to the body on which it rested, he was likely on the lanky side. An impish grin brought playfulness to his countenance. All in all, his features suggested a cross of bohemian and clown, contemplative and jester.

Theo had often seen performers like Basil on sidewalks and subways in Paris and New York. He knew some of them to be gloriously talented, thoughtful, and intelligent, even if unorthodox in their chosen vocation. What was sometimes dismissed as eccentricity in them was, arguably, genius.

Next bestowal: Basil Cannonfield.

CHAPTER 29

Minnette had arrived at her appointment with Theo inquisitively. Kendrick had approached his meeting skeptically.

Ellen's state of mind when she showed up at her bestowal would be pure conjecture. Nervous? Ceremonious?

Basil Cannonfield was the embodiment of calmness when he strode to the Fedder, as if it were entirely reasonable and predictable that a gift-giving, one-named stranger would summon him by handwritten letter to a fountainside rendezvous on a Thursday night in early May. As he approached Theo, he was smiling with the same boyish grin Asher had captured so precisely in the portrait.

"Mr. Theo, I think I've seen you before. You were standing off to the side of me last weekend, two nights in a row."

"I was indeed." Theo laughed like a child caught in mischief. "And I enjoyed your performance. I didn't know you had seen me."

"Well, Mr. Theo, you're not my typical audience, so you sort of stood out."

It was an odd start to a conversation between total strangers. The two men looked squarely at one another, at ease and unguarded.

"Actually, Mr. Theo, in my line of work it's rare for anybody to stop and listen, so, when somebody does, I can't help but notice. Thank you, too, for what you put in the envelope. A twenty is a big deal in this kind of work."

"Well, Mr. Cannonfield, it's nice to meet you." Theo put out his hand again as if to do a proper introduction. He nodded at the young man's guitar. "It looks like you're on your way to work."

"It's Basil — BC is what some of my friends call me. Yep, it's still a bit early but, yeah, I'm on my way to work. To my office. There aren't many rewards for being a thirty-two-year-old street musician, but it's kind of nice being my own boss. I set my hours. Are you in a hurry?"

Theo shook his head. "Not at all. I'm my own boss too. This," he gestured to the bench, "is my new office."

They sat close together in the middle of the bench. Basil stretched his

arm across the back, as if taking the old man under his wing. There was no sign of reluctance, and one might reasonably have taken them for father and son. Or grandfather and grandson.

Basil kicked off the conversation with the same reasonable question Minnette had asked at the first bestowal.

“So, Mr. Theo, I know what your letter said, but what’s the deal? Why are you doing this? It’s a nice thing to do, but there’s got to be more to it than that.”

Theo gave his well-rehearsed explanation.

The Chalice walls.

The inspiration.

The objective.

Basil listened without interruption, impressed by the story and charmed by the musicality of the old man’s voice — a voice seasoned with an exotic accent, spoken through lips that were bent into the constant suggestion of a grin, and reinforced by eyes that seemed to glisten with their own internal light.

“Basil, you have seen your portrait before, yes?”

“Well, I’ve glanced at it. I know Asher a little bit, and he told me he was going to draw it. When they first hung it on the wall, I went in and took a look, but it felt kind of funny to stand there staring at my own face so I didn’t look at it for long. But I *have* looked at a lot of the others. Asher is amazing. I can’t understand why he’s not big time yet. I bet he’d be really happy to know you’re doing this. I still don’t get it myself, but it’s pretty cool.”

A light breeze from the south stirred the oak. A leaf, as bright as a canary feather, one that had somehow held onto a limb through the long winter, finally lost its hold and fell into Theo’s lap. He picked it up.

“Ah. A coin of gold.”

“That’s a good idea for a song, Mr. Theo.”

“So, Basil, you do write songs?”

“I do. But I don’t get to play them very often. People give tips for songs they already know. I play popular songs to pay the bills, and I write my own songs because it’s what I enjoy. It’s good therapy. ‘Coins of Gold.’ I like that.”

“What kind of songs do you write? What category, what genre, do

you put them in?”

“I’m not sure what to call it. I grew up listening to all kinds of music —my parents’ music, my grandparents’ music. Blues, rock, big band, Motown, crooners, country, folk, classical, movie soundtracks. Really, I love it all. If there is such a thing as ‘gumbo music,’ where you just put in a little bit of everything and see what comes out, maybe that’s the category. Whatever it’s called, it’s a lot of fun, and you sure can go broke doing it.”

Basil’s big grin took over his face.

“How long have you been doing this sort of work?”

“You want the long answer or the short one?”

“Long version, please.”

“OK, so, my dad was in the army. He’s retired now, but we moved a lot when I was a kid. I’m still not sure which place to call ‘home.’ We were in Golden for all my high school years. I liked it here mostly because of my English teacher and my band teacher. One of ‘em made me believe I could write words, and the other convinced me I could write music. Summer of my sophomore year, I got a job and saved my money and bought a guitar and a chord book. That’s when I started learning how to play. After a couple of years, I knew a few songs and had written some, and I was starting to sing in front of people. It felt like a ‘calling’ or something, but I knew — and my parents reminded me often — how hard it is to make a living as a musician.

“After high school, I went away to college and got an English degree, so I could be a teacher. I read this essay one time about an English teacher. Whenever somebody asked him about his job, he would say he taught a course in magic. That made sense to me. Still does. He taught his students that words and books are like magic.”

Theo thought of Ellen and the spell that words and books had cast over her mind.

“Anyway, I got my degree and teaching certification and came back here. My parents had been transferred to another base by then, but my older sister was still in Golden. She’s six years older than me, but we were real close. Growing up military and all the moving around we did helped us to become really good friends. An army of two. That’s what we called ourselves. I wrote a song about that.”

Basil paused, took a breath, leaned forward, then rested his elbows on his knees and gazed into the fountain. Theo was tempted to say something and wanted to ask some obvious questions, but he maintained his silence.

“BC, we’re waiting for you!” Someone shouted from the direction of the Chalice. He straightened up and acknowledged the speaker with a wave of the hand, then turned to Theo.

“Don’t worry about them. They’ll be there whether I start a minute from now or an hour. So, anyway, I taught at one of the local high schools for several years. It was a low-income school, lots of single-parent stuff. It’s hard to teach kids the magic of words when they can barely read them, and I was frustrated a lot, but I lowered my expectations and stayed at it. I was starting to get the hang of it and had some small victories. But then my sister — Genevieve — was diagnosed with cancer, and her husband left her. ‘In sickness and in health’ obviously didn’t include caring for a wife with cancer.” Basil shook his head in obvious disgust. “I quit my job to help take care of her. It was tough, but I was lucky I had some money saved up and could be there for her. At first, she could get out, and we’d try to do things around town, day trips and stuff. Even when she was sick, she was fun to hang out with, but it was hard to watch her get weaker and weaker.”

Basil paused to take a breath. Theo remained silent.

“Eventually, it got where Genevieve couldn’t do much of anything, so we stayed home except for doctor visits and things like that. She slept a lot, and since she liked to hear me play, I wrote a bunch of soft songs to help her rest. They weren’t the kind of thing I could ever perform on a sidewalk. I loved it when I could sing her to sleep. An audience of one. The best ever.”

Theo nodded. “Thank you for telling the story. I’m very honored. And your sister, is she OK?”

“After about a year, she died.”

Theo winced.

“That was four years ago, but it seems at times like four hours. Her death sort of knocked me down. So much for the army of two. I didn’t have the heart to teach anymore, at least not right away. I was a mess.

Get this. My sister had a life insurance policy, but she didn't think to change the beneficiary when she got sick, so her husband got a lot of money. And then while we were having her funeral, he went into her house and took a lot of stuff. It's been four years, but if I saw him right now, I don't know what I might do to him. I'm just glad they didn't have kids."

Theo shook his head. Basil sat up straight as he continued. "So, it was heartbreak and rage and just a heck of a time for me. They were some dark days. I took over my sister's lease and still live there. My girlfriend is with me now, but for a long time, I was there alone. Sometimes I'd sit by my sister's bed and play songs. Probably sounds kind of morbid or crazy, but those moments were my rescue. I could still imagine I was singing her to sleep. Anyway, I'm not sure where the idea came from — maybe it's like that urge you had about the portraits — but one day I had the thought of singing on the street. I'd seen others do it and figured I could give it a try. I knew I wasn't ready to go back into teaching. It took a while to figure out the rules of being a street performer — who can stand where and all that — but I finally got it straight. And it took a while to get used to being ignored by people, but that comes with the territory. You gotta have thick skin to do this for a living. You ain't gonna make it long if you don't."

***Ain't*?**

Theo took note of the southernism. Ain't. It was his first time to hear it used. It was a word that played squarely into the sort of stereotypical caricature of the South that Theo had brought to Golden.

In truth, Basil had been a serious student in college and could diagram a sentence with impressive exactitude. He was capable of the King's English. But he also knew the patois of the street and was well-versed in the fine points of southern jargon. There was, to him, something lovable and endearing, even artistic, about the dialect of the Promenade. He felt no shame speaking and singing in the vernacular of his neighbors.

And then, as if suddenly aware that he had not yet responded to Theo's question, Basil gave the short answer, two words: "Three years. I've been doing street music for three years."

"Do you only play on certain nights?"

“Most weeks spring through autumn, I play at least three or four days a week, especially weekends. In winter, Shep lets me play in the shop sometimes. I don’t make much money, but my girlfriend and I are pretty low maintenance. I don’t know how much longer I’ll do this. Believe it or not, it’s pretty hard work. My poor dad thinks I’ve lost my mind, and my mom worries about me starving. I should have outgrown my need for their blessing by now, but what they think still matters to me. I considered doing some tutoring or substitute teaching just to be able to tell them I have a respectable job.”

Theo perked up. He knew a little girl who might benefit from having a private tutor. “So, you still teach sometimes?”

“Not yet, but maybe.”

“Do you still write songs?”

“All the time. I don’t finish many. If I had a reason to, concerts or something, I think I would. But mostly I start them and quit before I’m finished. I hope someday I can record a few of them, a good recording, just to see how they’d sound with a bit of polish. In fact, have you seen the guy who carries the cello around? Simone? I barely know him, but I told him I was gonna write a song for him and his cello. That’d be kind of interestin’, wouldn’t it? So, Mr. Theo, that’s me. What about you? Your letter said you just recently moved to town.”

Another shout across the median, the same voice as previously, called out to Basil. He waved it off as he’d done minutes earlier.

“It looks like you need to get to work,” Theo said. “Your fans are getting restless.”

Basil chuckled. “If I depended on them for my next meal, I’d be in trouble. But maybe I do need to go. Let’s talk again sometime, OK?”

“Basil, before you go, may I tell you something?” Theo pulled the paper off the portrait and held it on his knees so that it was plainly visible to the both of them. “I want to tell you what I saw when I looked at your portrait.”

Basil said nothing, but, emboldened by the old man’s focus on the drawing, looked at it himself as Theo’s finger touched the glass.

“I saw a boy in the smile. It’s a face that hasn’t forgotten playfulness. I think children would be drawn to this face. But I also see a man. There is wisdom here, I believe. In the eyes. A young, tender heart; a

wise, old soul. That's a good combination. Wisdom and playfulness. There is the possibility of a saint in this face. This could well be a portrait of St. Basil."

Basil shook his head at such a ludicrous suggestion. St. Basil? "No time soon, I'm afraid. I've already told you enough to permanently disqualify me from that club. I hate my brother-in-law. I wimped out on teaching kids in poverty. I'm living hand to mouth. My mom says I'm living in sin with my girlfriend. I'm hardly making the world a better place. They'd have to change the requirements of sainthood a lot for me to ever be one."

Theo smiled and patted Basil's knee.

"Basil, my good fellow, there is a term for ones like us. 'Raw material.' Read your Augustine. And remember, heaven can draw a straight line with a crooked stick."

Though still doubtful, Basil grinned. "I suppose so, but sainthood? Don't think so. Maybe I'll just try to be the guy you see in the picture. Wisdom and playfulness?"

Theo patted Basil's knee again and nodded his old head. "That's a start. Tender heart, wise soul. That's a good start. Go sing like that fellow tonight."

They rose to leave. What started as a handshake became the comfortable and confident hug of two old friends. Basil picked up his guitar case and backpack with his left hand and gripped the portrait, loosely covered with the wrapping paper, in his right.

"Well, Theo, wish me a good night."

"Yes, yes. May all your tips be tens and twenties."

"Now don't get carried away."

"Then may all your tips tonight fall from heaven. Coins of gold."

"I like it. Hey, Theo, you didn't ask me about my name. People always ask about my name."

"Ha. They ask me about mine too. Let's leave it at this: You are Basil, and I am Theo."

A gold leaf fell between them. Another late departure.

The lanky figure took his place on the sidewalk, strummed loudly, lifted his voice, and sang. Theo remained at the fountain, listening to the sounds of street noise before heading west to watch sunset over the

river and then returning to Ponder House.

CHAPTER 30

As part of its downtown renaissance, Golden had constructed a twelve-mile walkway beside the Oxbow River, in faith that “if we build it, they will come.” The desired gravitational pull began, in very short order, to draw young families, children, lovestruck couples, elderly strollers, artists, photographers, tourists, troubled souls in search of calm, dog owners, and runners to the waterside thoroughfare. But even when busy, the Riverwalk, as it was known, rarely felt crowded. Anyone hoping for a place to sit quietly had no shortage of options available to them.

On his bench beneath the chestnut oak, Theo had an open view, upstream and down, from which to watch, hear, and cast his thoughts into the flow of the Oxbow. Where the current might take those thoughts on any given day was a mystery.

They often returned to the river, four thousand miles away, near his childhood home in Portugal. That river, the Douro (“river of gold”), traversed the wine country and was much like this one: tree-lined, navigable, and musical. It ran through villages, through the countryside, over stone, and beneath bridges, in areas lightly populated or entirely secluded. And like every river everywhere, it hosted sunrises and sunsets of unspeakable and often unnoticed beauty; it welcomed the adventurous and the amorous, fisherfolk and philosophers, the playful and the plaintive.

Decades ago, it had welcomed a little boy with a keen sense of wonder and an eye for the sublime. On the blissful days of spring and summer, when the scent of ripening grapes was in the air, a scent that would somehow be bottled and sent around the world to be enjoyed at future times and distant tables, he would answer the call of that river, blessedly free, to spend hours by himself or with other young friends.

Imagine a boy on a bicycle:

Past the pastel-tinted storefronts and dwellings (the stuff of postcards and travel brochures), beneath the thunderous bells of the church building, through streets filled with aromas of sardines and coffee, surrounded by a shadow of antiquity that coated ancient structures with shades of teal and ochre, and accompanied by the romantic language of the Portuguese. By that route, the boy would arrive at the footpath to the banks of the Douro.

Once there, the serious work of play and exploration took over.

There were local fishermen, at the riverside or in their boats, to be studied. There were birds to be watched — lapwings, kites, swamp hens, eagles — nests to be discovered, stones to be upended, and any number of extravagances beneath them to be scrutinized — shells, crustaceans, slugs, smaller pebbles. If he were with other boys, as was often the case, there were stories to be invented, castles to be built, battles to be fought, and feats of courage to be dared and performed. And, of course, there was wading and swimming.

That young boy, now grown old and resting on a bench in the American Southeast, watches the same sun that, decades ago, had tanned his strong shoulders and glistened in his ink-black hair on the hillsides of Southwest Europe. And he wonders . . .

Might it be that water from the river of his childhood had found its way to this one, that the cyclical life of rainfall — sky to earth to sky again, over and over — had brought the elixir of the Iberian wine country to this place? That the river of gold in Portugal had come, through cloudburst and current, to this river of gray in Golden? And had some of Golden's flow found its way to the hillsides of Theo's childhood? Was there, after all, only one big river that flowed across the earth?

Across the river, a thread of color, woven into the evening clouds, caught Theo's eye and conjured up a memory from boyhood.

It was summer.

A Saturday.

Clear weather.

Theo left his bicycle at home and walked into the town that morning. He and his friends spent an energetic day together — kicking futbol, walking through the marketplace in the town center, sitting among others at the fountain, and finally, exploring the riverside.

By late afternoon, the small gaggle had begun to thin, falling away one at a time until Theo found himself alone, walking home by the route that allowed him to stay beside the Douro for as long as possible.

For a young boy like Theo, one with a sensitivity to the subtleties of light and color, the beauty of early evening was entrancing, even if he had no words yet for the feeling of sacredness that was taking up

residence inside him. Perhaps there are no such words.

As he walked the footpath along a treeless stretch of shoreline, he saw ahead a small fishing boat, *Menino do Rio,* anchored at an eddy among short reeds. It was a simple craft, outfitted with oars and an old three-horsepower motor. It was well maintained, freshly painted, and filled with all the equipment of the trade: nets, rods and reels, line, catchwell, and bait box. The owner, like many in the region, probably worked the vineyards and the river — depending on hour of day and time of year — harvesting from land *and* water for his daily bread.

Near the boat on the riverbank stood a fisherman whom Theo had never seen before. The man wore high rubber boots, a short-brimmed cap, and the working clothes of a commoner. His heavy shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, was stained with the evidence of a day's catch. He was stocky and muscular, a fact that became clearer as Theo walked toward the man. Heavy stubble highlighted his strong, square jawline. Thick eyebrows guarded dark, serious eyes.

At first, Theo could not tell what the fisherman was doing. As he stepped closer, however, he realized the man was painting a picture, standing at an artist's easel, facing west. The man held a palette with small bowls of color in his left hand and a paintbrush in his right. His eyes were fixed intently on the sunset and the distant shore. He did not seem to notice the boy approaching hesitantly from his left.

Not that young Theo was afraid or timid, not in the slightest. Rather, he sensed intuitively that the man was doing work worthy of silence and should not be disturbed.

Theo stood behind the stranger, with only a few feet between them, and watched as the western horizon took shape in miniature on the canvas. With each brushstroke, the fisher-painter's sinewy arms rippled, as they did, no doubt, when he pulled at his net or fishing lines. In both cases, the man was in quest of a catch.

At the moment, he was intent on catching the sky in front of him.

The little boy discerned a pattern in the artist's work: observe sky, observe canvas, brush to palette, mix color, brush to canvas, stroke or dab or blend. Again and again and again.

Without knowing he had done so, Theo had inched forward until he was standing close enough to touch the fisherman, close enough to

smell the odd, subtle fragrance of oil paint and perch.

“If you’ll step here, I believe you can see the canvas better.”

The fisherman’s voice startled young Theo and brought him out of his daze, but he said nothing in reply. The man continued speaking, as if he and the boy were old friends who had long been in conversation. He only looked at Theo from the corner of his eye. There was a welcome in his voice.

“Any fisherman knows that this is the best time to be fishing. But artists know this is the enchanted hour, when the sunlight is most magical. It’s hard to know sometimes. Fish or paint, right? Fish or paint? Well, I tell you, this time of year, I’m afraid I have no choice. I always make time for this. And thank the Almighty, I had a nice catch this morning. A full net. If I could, I would do this every evening for the rest of my life. I would stand right here every evening and paint that same tree line, that same horizon, that same sky, and no two paintings would ever be the same.”

Theo listened without reply, not fully understanding what the man was saying. He watched like one in a trance as the man painted.

Observe sky. Observe canvas. Brush to palette, mix color, brush to canvas, stroke or dab or blend.

The man, brows raised in query, looked at the boy with a disarming gentleness in his eyes.

“Am I getting close? Is it done?”

The boy remained silent.

“The problem with a sunset is that it won’t stay still. In a single minute it can change itself entirely. See?”

He touched the brush to the canvas at a streak of orange that he had applied only minutes before.

“See?”

Then, he pointed his brush toward the western sky. Instead of orange, there was now a muted shade of violet.

“It’s already gone. Oh, well.”

The fisher-painter continued working without further comment. The canvas was almost full of color, and the act of benevolent larceny, stealing a sunset, was almost done. A small portion of the canvas, at what should have been the river’s western shoreline, remained

unpainted.

The fisherman stepped slightly in front of the easel, knelt down, and pushed the handle of the paintbrush into the soft ground beside the water. He pushed his finger into the gray sediment and scooped out a dollop of sludge. He stood, returned to the easel, and began to rub the mud into the unpainted spot on the canvas.

“Use what you have. Now you. Give me your hand.”

Theo obeyed. The fisherman put river dirt on the boy’s right thumb. “Now paint.”

Theo stood motionless, uncertain. The fisherman, a bit more insistently but not unkindly, repeated his instruction.

“Paint. Here, do as I do.”

By way of example, he dragged his finger left to right, careful not to press too heavily into the canvas. Then he took Theo’s hand and guided his muddy thumb along the painting’s surface.

The fisherman leaned back and chuckled. “Well done. You are now an artist.”

Theo smiled shyly.

“Now, boy, your dear mom is going to be worried if you don’t get home soon. If she’s upset with you, give her this, and tell her you were painting.”

The fisherman took the canvas from the easel, handed it to the boy, instructed him to be mindful of the wet paint, then patted his shoulder and pushed him along.

Theo walked home with the sunset in his hands. When he turned away from the river and into the streets of the town, he looked back a final time to see a small but strong figure in the distance, pulling oars against the current of nickel-plated water.

For weeks after that evening, Theo returned to the river, expecting and hoping that he might meet the artist again. It was not to be, and Theo wondered if the evening, and the bestowal, had ever really happened.

Most assuredly, it had.

On the wall behind his desk in New York City, a framed canvas of western sky and Portuguese riverbank was tangible proof that fishermen paint sunsets and angels are real.

CHAPTER 31

From his wicker throne in front of the Verbivore, Tony had a clear line of sight to the Fedder. More specifically, to the bench on the south side of the fountain where Theo carried out his bestowals.

Tony had seen Theo and Minnette when they sat there together.

And Theo and Kendrick.

And Theo and Ellen.

And Theo with Basil, Junior, Bun, Frankie, and others.

It was obvious to Tony that the téte-à-têtes were not accidental, but he kept his questions to himself for a while. The little he knew of Theo satisfied him that, whatever the old fellow was doing, it must be something useful, good, or, at worst, harmless.

Eventually, he did ask Theo about the fountain encounters.

It was a sunny morning. The two of them were sitting alone outside the Verbivore. Tony was well into his second cigarette of the day.

"Theo, explain something to me. I've got a clear view of the fountain from here, and I see you over there a lot. You're always with somebody, and y'all always seem to be talking about something important. So, if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing over there?"

Theo nodded. "I don't mind at all, but would you keep it between the two of us?"

"Sure."

"Actually, Tony, you already know. I told you already about giving Ellen her portrait. Remember? Well . . ."

Theo told Tony the story of the epiphany in the Chalice. "Giving the portraits is my life's work at this point."

Even Tony the contrarian couldn't help but be touched by the old man's thoughtfulness. He shook his head in mild disbelief, patted Theo's knee, and strung together a litany of phrases and questions that were intended to be compliments. "Well, that beats all. I'll be damned. Who on earth thinks of something like that? That's crazy as hell, and it's awfully nice of you, but Theo, really, I mean, really, why on earth does anybody do something like that?"

Theo smiled. Nodded skyward. Laughed.

“I’m serious, Theo. Let’s have a real conversation sometime. I want you to tell me why you do that. I want to know.”

“‘Twould be my pleasure, Antony. My pleasure.”

That hoped-for conversation did eventually occur. Sort of.

“Theo, do Mafia bosses like you drink brandy? I’ve got a special bottle I’ve been saving for a special occasion. Let’s open it tonight. I’ll close the shop and lock the door, so we can meet without the Loafers hanging around and interrupting. Eight o’clock work?”

Actually, eight was on the late side for Theo, but he offered no alternative.

“Eight o’clock it is. What can I bring?”

“Yourself and an empty glass.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Forget the empty glass. Just bring yourself.”

At the appointed time, Theo walked into the Verbivore, stood at the door as Tony locked up, and navigated his way through stacks of books to the chaotic space known as Tony’s office, where a pair of comfortable chairs awaited them. A small table, two glasses, and a bottle were within arm’s reach of both chairs. A lamp on Tony’s desk created an island of warm light around which books of every size, shape, color, and texture stood sentry.

The space had the gravitas, if not the decor, of a confessor’s booth.

Tony poured brandy into the glasses. They raised them ceremoniously to each other’s health, took a sip, and then settled back into their chairs. For a half hour or so, they talked about life on Broadway and the acquaintances they had in common — Ellen, Shep, Simone, the Penny Loafers.

“I saw young Simone this afternoon,” Tony said. “He told me to tell you hello and said he’d still be happy to get with you sometime and talk about cello stuff. He’s a bright kid.”

“It takes a special mind to master that instrument,” Theo replied. “I hope I get to hear him play sometime.”

When they finished their first glass of brandy, Tony poured another for each of them. His eyes already glowed with the effects of the first.

“Theo, this is an old bottle. A friend of mine, a fellow grunt from

Vietnam, gave it to me at a reunion we had when the Wall was unveiled in Washington. You know the Wall?"

Theo nodded.

Fifty-eight thousand three hundred and twenty names on black granite had become an icon among American monuments.

"That was a helluva day, Theo. It's amazing how a flat piece of stone can change your life, but that damn thing brought stuff up in me I'd been holding in for a long time. I'm still not sure why I went to see it, and I'm not sure I should have, but it probably did me some good. You ever fight in a war?"

"I lived on the fringes but never fought in one. I remember bits of the war in Spain from my childhood. And I was thirteen when World War Two ended. Thankfully, Portugal was on the sidelines; we remained neutral, you know. But we felt the effects long after it was over. How long were you in the military, Tony?"

"Too long. I was drafted. I didn't really know what the hell it meant. I don't think any of us did. If we had, we probably all would have run to Canada. If somebody had shown us a film of what Vietnam really looked and felt like and then asked for volunteers, Uncle Sam couldn't have fielded a baseball team.

"I was in for four years. Two here. Two there. Or maybe two there and the rest of my life here. A lot of us brought the jungle back home with us, and we've been there every day ever since. It was a helluva mess, Theo. That war messed up a lot of guys something terrible."

Tony's voice lightened, almost to cheerfulness. "Theo, you might not believe this, but before Vietnam I was a nice, quiet young man who read books and obeyed the rules. Didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't cuss. I was a bit of a nerd. I was planning to go to college, maybe on a golf scholarship, but all that changed when they drafted me. I couldn't qualify for a deferment, and my parents didn't have any pull, so I got shipped off to Basic. They shaved my head, gave me a new wardrobe, taught me a bit about being a soldier, and then sent me to Vietnam. I was what they called a 'quickie.' The Army needed lots of young fighters over there, so they sent us whether we were ready or not.

"I'd never shot a gun before, and here I was going into combat, in the jungle, no less. I wasn't excited about it, but it felt kind of manly — for

about two days. I was in pretty good shape from walking on American golf courses, but god aw'mighty, was I in for a surprise."

Tony took a long pull from his snifter and let the amber fire rest on the back of his tongue.

"The guy who gave me this brandy lives up in Illinois. We served together in First Infantry. The jungle totally ruined him. He's been drunk, stoned, homeless, or in jail ever since he got back. That's over fifty years. He got married a couple of times, but they both fell apart. We hadn't seen each other for years, until the Wall dedication, and when we saw each other, it was the weirdest thing. We shook hands and laughed like it was a high school reunion.

"And then, out of nowhere, we both started sobbing. All of a sudden, I think we both had visions of what we had lived through together. God, it was horrible." Tony closed his eyes and groaned. "It was hell. It . . . was . . . hell.

“And it was like, when we saw each other, we were both thinking, did we really live through that? Were we really there? And I think we both hurt for each other. Then I grabbed him, and we held on to each other, and I swear it felt like we were begging for forgiveness or something, not just for being soldiers in that war but also for being part of a world that can do such godawful things.”

Tony closed his eyes, squinted, and squeezed the bridge of his nose between a thumb and middle finger. He poured himself another generous portion of brandy.

By slow degrees, he was being transported to a realm of thatched roofs, rice paddies, and palm trees. The rasping hum of insects and the gummy heat of the tropical forest began to fill his sotted thoughts. Muddy fatigues on bug-bitten skin. The scent of napalm. Ominous stares of villagers squatting on their haunches. Torn limbs and pained faces of wounded comrades. It all began to surface like smoky visions from a crystal ball.

“That fellow and I served at Ben Suc together. You ever heard of that?”

Theo shook his head.

“Not many folks know about it. But it was a pretty hot area, near a place called the Iron Triangle. We’d been out in the jungle on a mission for weeks, up to our asses in blood and pus and bugs, and soon as we got back to base, they told us we had to go on a big surprise mission the very next day, to this little village called Ben Suc. It was on the Saigon River.

“From the air, it was actually a pretty little place, at least until the war. There were lots of VC there — the bad guys — and it had been a thorn in our side, so the big bosses finally decided to deal with it once and for all. The mission was real hush-hush, didn’t even tell the South Vietnam army about it until the day it happened. We just woke up that morning and dropped hell on their heads.”

Theo listened without moving.

“The plan was simple. Attack, and capture or kill the bad guys, then evacuate the women and kids and old people, and then totally demolish the place. Bomb it, burn it, bulldoze it, just make it disappear. It wasn’t much of a fight, really. We went in on sixty helicopters. It only took

fifteen minutes to land and offload every one of them. Pretty damn impressive. Most of the enemy ran when they realized what was happening, and when we landed there were mostly just women and children in the village, lots of ‘em. We were still on high alert ‘cause they had tunnels all over the place, but we didn’t have to do much shooting.”

Tony swigged his brandy.

“I even made a friend, sort of, with this little kid on the first day we were there. Kids are amazing. At first, whenever we went into a village, even if we blew the place to hell, after a while the little kids would come out, and they’d start looking for things to play with — empty shell casings, plastic pipe, tarps — anything. We were their toy store. Can you imagine?

“Well, this one little kid, maybe five or six years old, was at a hut while his mother was packing her stuff to evacuate. We were going to airlift all of ‘em out over the next few days and relocate them. Well, I’m walking by and this little boy looks at me, and I sort of smile, which was not really like me, especially over there, but damn if he doesn’t smile back, and a little while later I notice he’s following me around. And the whole time I could hear bombing and shooting in the distance and sometimes close by, and it was a pretty chaotic situation. And this little kid just keeps following me around. I wasn’t paying him much attention; I was too damn busy, but I kept an eye on him. Even kids could hurt you over there, and we were always on edge around them. But all he had on was a little raggedy-ass pair of shorts and no shirt, so I could see there weren’t any bombs or weapons strapped to him.”

Another swig.

“Late that first day, the little kid brought me an egg, like a sign of friendship or something. Just a plain old chicken egg, but that was kind of a big deal. I wanted to give him something, but I didn’t have any candy, and I couldn’t give him a knife or anything like that, so, Theo, get this: I gave him my good luck charm. It was all I had.”

Theo asked the obvious. “What was your good luck charm?”

“Don’t laugh. It was a golf ball. When I was in high school, I was on the golf team, and one day at practice, I hit a hole in one. Hole number twelve, Golden Country Club. Big deal, right? But I kept that ball with

me all the time. I got teased about it a lot. Go to prom with a golf ball in your tuxedo pocket, and you're setting yourself up to get ragged on. Like I said, I was a bit of a weird kid.

"But I had that same golf ball with me in Vietnam, in the pocket of my fatigues. And I thought, well, if anybody needs some good luck over here, it's probably that little kid. So, I gave him the golf ball. You'd have thought I just gave him the Hope diamond. I didn't see him anymore that day. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of villagers that had to be evacuated, and there were people and farm animals and troops all mixed in together. It was dangerous as hell, and we knew there were still VCs in the area. It took three days to complete the evacuation. We were exhausted and we'd given the enemy plenty of time to organize an attack if they wanted to come after us. We were all on edge. Mad and jittery, that's a dangerous combination."

Tony paused, massaged his forehead, rubbed his eyes with a thumb and middle finger again, took a gulp of brandy, and trained his eyes on the air in front of him. "I'm talking too much."

Theo sat in priestly stillness, struggling for something to say. Before he could conjure up anything, Tony resumed his story.

His words had become hesitant and sloppy. There were long, dense pauses as his memory imported every emotion he had felt in the jungle near Ben Suc that day: exhaustion, terror, hatred, a tense anticipation bordering on nausea.

He was in a world far removed from Golden. The calm stillness of the Verbivore was a figment. Vietnam was his reality.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly through distended cheeks, then straightened his spine and sat back in his chair.

He gazed into his glass, eyes tightening and then opening widely, as if dragons were swimming in the brandy.

He was looking through the core of the earth to a rice paddy nine thousand miles and five decades away. Abruptly, he gasped like a man seeing a ghost.

"Oh my god, no, stop."

His hand, trembling slightly, squeezed the glass of brandy. Theo feared it might crack under the pressure.

The final scene from Ben Suc had begun to unfold in Tony's mind. It was a scene from which he had fled all his adult life. He never knew when or how the "play" button would be triggered. Sometimes it was a nightmare. Sometimes a photograph or a line in something he read. The vision had struck on one occasion in a grocery store, when his cart had nearly bumped into a child on the bakery aisle.

Now, with brandy dilating his veins and narrowing his thoughts, he heard the faint flutter of that awful film spooling through his mind. He shivered and took another hard pull from his glass, hoping to drown the vision.

It had the opposite effect.

Tony resumed speaking. He never looked toward Theo.

"The next day, we were getting ready to load up the civilians and fly them away. Some of the women were bitching at us, and we were trying to help them carry their pots and their shovels and their stinkin' pigs and trying to stay alert in case some gook showed up out of nowhere to throw a grenade at us.

"We got the last of the villagers lined up to leave. There were two or three hundred of them. There were two lines of them, about twenty yards apart, and a few of us walking between 'em. It was still tense as hell, and we were exhausted. Soon as we got everybody out, we were going to burn the place to the ground and return to base."

Tony closed his eyes, pictured the lines of evacuees, and recalled the reciprocal bitterness of those moments — from soldiers to villagers and from villagers to soldiers — as they trudged to the helicopters. The sweat stung his eyes, blurred his vision. The weight of his gun and the weariness of recent days pulled his shoulders downward. Forty paces in front of him, a fellow GI also walked between the lines. Forty paces behind him, the same.

Tony heard a shout from the rear, a shout of panic. Villagers immediately crouched or fell to the ground, covering their heads.

"TONY, look out! Look out! LOOK OUT!"

Tony heard his name again, this time from in front of him. "Get down! Tony, behind you!"

A woman screamed, a shrill, catlike shriek of hysteria. The soldier behind Tony tried to train his gun on her. Tony turned. Sweat burned

his eyes, but he saw a figure running at him. “TONY! GRENADE! SHOOT! Tony, SHOOOT!”

Tony instinctively raised his gun and pulled the trigger. The assailant was feet away from him.

The shrill cry of the woman filled the air with insanity.

The air sprayed crimson as bullets tore at the attacker’s chest and throat.

Their eyes met.

The small shirtless body of a child splayed onto the ground.

“Oh my god. Oh, god, no. No! Oh my god.”

A golf ball rolled from the little boy’s hand.

Tony shook his head over and over. Closed his eyes. Took several deep breaths. Moaned. Took another sip. Sat back again, spent.

An uneasy silence followed.

It might have been seconds or minutes before Tony, damp-eyed and in little more than a whisper, slurred an apology.

“I’m sorry, Theo. Ohh, I’m so sorry.” Long exhale. “I try not to let my mind ever go back there. I never talk about this to anyone.”

Theo nodded but said nothing. Tony took yet another long pull of brandy. Theo took a discreet sip. He had not been drunk since the day of his daughter’s death, and he saw no reason to cross that line tonight.

Tony continued, his voice calmer but his words still fragmented. “Theo, if nothing else, the war made me honest. Opened my eyes. It cured me of any romantic notions I had about the human race. Creatures who are capable of doing the things that happened there don’t have much to brag about. It’s crazy what a jungle and fear and a gun and some misguided patriotism can bring out of a man. I’m afraid there’s a killer inside every one of us.

“Before Vietnam, I was just Dan and Mitzi’s boy, then all of a sudden, at least off and on while I was over there, I was a devil. Vietnam was a world full of monsters, and I was one of ‘em. It scares me that the monster might still be in me somewhere.” He paused. “As bad as the guilt and shame and nightmares have been, in some way they give me hope that I still have a conscience and a heart, even if they’re screwed all to hell up. I hope so.

“I hate the politicians who sent us there. If there’s such a thing as

righteous anger, sane hate, it's for people like that. I hated what they did then, hate what they do now sometimes. But I don't blame them for what the war showed me about myself."

Another pull from the glass.

And then a long silence. A cooling-down period.

As if to declare Vietnam over and done for this evening, Tony asked a question.

"Theo, you know what Ellen checked out the other day? Two books: *Peter Pan* and The *Killing of Pablo Escobar*. She's a piece of work, isn't she?"

Theo raised his glass. "Here's to Tony, who made it home from the jungle, so he could care for St. Ellen of the Promenade."

Tony consented to the faint praise and raised his glass. They both took a sip.

"Have you always liked books?" Theo asked the question in hopes of further dispelling the intensity of the previous hour. Tony seemed all too happy to take the bait.

"Well, books are safe, aren't they? Most of the time, anyway. But yeah, I've liked — loved — reading most of my life. My parents did too. They always had lots of things lying around that even a kid could enjoy. I think they did that on purpose."

The two men talked books, shared something of their education and upbringing, and told some safe family stories. Tony spoke with surprising clarity for a man who had just consumed almost an entire bottle of brandy and who, only minutes before, had been so emotionally unhinged.

He and Theo even laughed a time or two and enjoyed, all in all, what Tony would later describe to the Penny Loafers as a "damn good conversation. Y'all should try it sometime."

But the war never quite left the room. It hung like a fog around them, unmentioned any further but clearly present.

Muted street noise leaked in from the sidewalk, evidence that night life on the Promenade was well underway. For some out there, the night was still young. For Theo, it had exceeded one day's energy.

He reached across the small table and patted Tony's arm.

"Tony, I'm very grateful to know you. Thank you for sharing some of

your story with me. I hope I didn't ask too much."

Tony nodded. "I don't think you asked anything at all. I'm afraid I totally lost control. I *thought* we were going to talk about those secret meetings you've been having at the Fedder. And I was going to ask you to talk about heaven, right?"

"Ah, yes. Maybe next time?"

"I guess if you talk about heaven, you're going to talk about hell too."

Theo raised a brow. "I have a feeling you might be able to teach me something about that yourself. I think you've had a big taste of hell already. I fear you believe that's all there is. You seem much less convinced about the other possibility."

Another short, thoughtful silence descended.

"You need some help getting home?" Tony asked. "Those three flights of stairs might be tricky." It was a dubious offer from a man who was probably incapable of walking a straight line himself.

"It's OK, Tony. If I can get out of this chair, I think I can waddle home by myself. If I can't, I'll sleep on a bench by the fountain. Thank you for letting me join you tonight. Next time we'll meet at my place and I will introduce you to a wonderful bottle of port from my hometown."

They said their farewells as Tony unlocked the door to the shop. Theo stepped out into the night and walked home to the sound of Basil's music. Tony stepped back inside the Verbivore, noticed a bit of brandy in Theo's glass, drained it dry, and turned off the light.

CHAPTER 32

By the time Lamisha was released from Crossway Medical Center, a month after her eighth birthday, Theo had become a regular and welcome visitor to room 626.

The little girl would still have to endure future surgeries and physical therapy, but Dr. Ikande thought it best to keep her hospital stays as short as possible. It was his informed medical opinion that "there is healing power in being at home."

On the day Lamisha was discharged from the hospital, she asked Theo a question that had been on her mind for days.

"When I get out of the hospital, will you still come see me?"

His response was immediate. "It would be an honor, my dear."

And so, once a week, Theo would walk to the nearest bus stop (the one Kendrick used), step aboard the number 37 bus (driven by Mr. Gilliard), and make the twenty minute ride to Tilley Street where the Whitakers lived. He would disembark at the corner and walk a block or so to their front door. They lived in a modest rental in an old, blighted part of the city, far from any hint of "renaissance." Peeling paint, missing shingles, cracked windowpanes, and miscellaneous other signs of neglect were standard features on many of the houses along the street. The Whitaker residence included some of those imperfections. Their landlord clearly did not spend money on landscaping and curb appeal.

On the inside, however, the house was clean, orderly, and fragrant with the scent of pine oil. The furniture was mismatched, dated, and worn but every piece was polished, dusted, and tidy. Grandmother Whitaker would have it no other way. She did the best she could with what she had.

Theo tried to visit once a week, and did so with rare exception. The early visits had an awkwardness to them — the Whitakers were not used to having guests, especially ones like Theo, in their home — but by his third appearance, a routine had been established, and any sense of unease was gone.

Once there, Theo would visit briefly with Kendrick and Grandmother Whitaker and then give his undivided attention to the little girl. She was clearly the main event in his mind.

When the two of them had first met at the hospital, Lamisha's shyness quickly gave way to a soft-spoken but free-flowing stream of youthful consciousness, a reward for the tenderness with which the grandfatherly old man engaged the child.

Throughout his life, business dealings had brought Theo into the company of educated, cosmopolitan, refined adults on a regular basis. He was comfortable and capable, even impressive, among them. But he was equally, maybe more so, at ease in the company of children, especially a child like Lamisha. She had not yet learned the skills of pretentiousness and manipulation, and she still maintained enough of her innocence to be called a little girl.

It might be wondered how an old childless man cultivated such a

rapport, such a comfortable disposition, such a disarming presence with children like her. His explanation was always the same.

“Two things: I had a very good father, and I used to be a child myself.” (And also, though he rarely said so, “I used to have a child myself.”)

Theo arrived at Lamisha's each week with a book in hand, acting on the premise that all people, young and old, love stories. He had been pleasantly surprised to find a sizable collection of children's books at the Verbivore and even more surprised to learn that Tony was a big fan of the genre.

When Tony figured out what Theo was doing with the books — reading and giving them to the little girl — he began to lay aside his own favorites and even to ask young mothers and fathers for recommendations.

Who would have guessed that the crusty old war veteran was as conversant about Narnia and Terabithia as he was about Tet and Saigon? Or that Aesop and Seuss had firmly established places on his personal list of must-read literature? The Penny Loafers knew not to make fun of Tony's affinity for children's books.

Picture the scene. Theo and Lamisha take their places, side by side and close together at one end of the sofa, what the elderly Mrs. Whitaker called the "davenport." They hold their book of the week in such a way that both can read the text and see whatever illustrations are on the pages.

And then, with a mild bit of fanfare, Theo delicately turns to page one and introduces the story thusly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I now present to you, for your listening and viewing pleasure, a reading of . . ."

And so he begins.

At some passages he lingers and lowers his voice for effect. At others, if the action of the story calls for it, he speaks as fast as his mouth allows.

Sometimes he and Lamisha take turns reading the lines. Theo obviously has an agenda in mind when they do so. He is helping a child improve her reading skills, but he is also teaching a course, as Basil might say, "in magic."

The magic of story.

The wonder of words.

The fertility of imagination.

"Ah, Lamisha, you read so beautifully, my dear. Do that page one more time for me. And now, once more. What is this big word? 'Accidentally.' And tell me, how many syllables are in the word?" He claps out the syllables. "Ac-ci-den-tal-ly. One, two, three, four, five. And how many vowels? And consonants? Excellent! You read it so well. Once again, please."

Sometimes they read in unison, Theo suggesting inflection and cadence. They celebrate exclamation points enthusiastically, with increased decibels and animated gestures.

The little girl savors the warmth and expressiveness of the old man's voice. It is not merely a sound. It is a place. A color. A haven.

And for the old man, the moments are equally enchanted. They bring to mind vivid memories of sitting on a sofa in France, decades earlier, with his own dear child, Tita. They enjoyed some of the same books he now shares with Lamisha.

Some of Theo's happiest moments long ago were story time with *that*

little girl. Some of his happiest moments now are story time with *this* little girl. To read with either was to drink from a chalice of gold.

Before long, Lamisha's dad, initially at her request but eventually on his own, began reading and re-reading stories with her. Sometimes he required the little girl's help, and sometimes she asked, "How many syllables are in that word?"

The davenport became home to Eeyore and Aslan and Miss Rumphius and Punchinello and a Giving Tree.

In many of those characters, Kendrick was sure he saw glimpses of Mr. Theo.

On one memorable occasion, Theo arrived with a sketchbook in hand.

It contained a story of his own making, painstakingly written in block letters and illustrated with simple pictures that a six-year-old could have drawn: stick figures, lollipop trees, clover-leaf clouds.

He had written the story with a specific child in mind: a little girl with a pronounced limp and a brace on her leg; a little girl afraid of returning to school after almost a year of absence; a little girl self-conscious and fearful of being different than her peers.

The story was called "The Princess of Titalamish."

Theo insisted that Lamisha learn to pronounce the name correctly. "Like this, one syllable at a time. Tee-tah-lah-meesh. You say it. . . . Ah yes, wonderful! . . . And now, once more."

The word felt exotic and full of romance as it rolled off her tongue.

"Tee-tah-lah-meesh."

The story was about a little girl who was given a pair of strikingly colorful, magic shoes, a gift from her Papá. Theo described them with gusto.

"These magical shoes were blue, blue, blue. Bluer than blue! Blue as the morpho. Yes, blue as the morpho butterfly! Beautiful blue!"

He would go on to explain however that, though beautiful, the shoes made the little girl different, undeniably so, than all her classmates.

"Because, you see, they all wore red shoes. Red, red, red. Everywhere, red! And because the little girl was not like all the rest of the children, they teased her and called her names and would not sit with her or be her friend. Ah, my goodness, what was the dear little child to do?"

Theo employed every dramatic skill he possessed — gesture, inflection, phrasing, silence, repetition — to bring the story to life for Lamisha. `And in response, she listened, spellbound, all the way from "once upon a time" to "happily ever after.[1]"

When he finished the reading, Theo closed the sketchbook and handed it to his young companion.

“For you, my dear. This is the only copy in all the world.”

That gift would forever be one of Lamisha’s most prized possessions. She kept it beneath another of her most prized possessions — her dad’s portrait — on the end table beside her bed.

Throughout his year in Golden, Theo visited the little girl. She returned to school, but remained in physical therapy and made regular visits to Dr. Ikande. Whenever treatment or prosthetics were required, Theo made certain she was provided for as if she were his own, sometimes in open and obvious ways and sometimes quietly through the agency of Mr. Ponder.

Early on, in his weekly rides on bus number 37, Theo looked a bit out of place, but, in time, other passengers who rode the bus daily became accustomed to his presence. Before long, he knew a number of them, and they knew him, by name.

1 The full text of “The Princess of Titalamish,” read by the author, is available at www.allenlevi.com. Anyone choosing to read it aloud themselves is advised to do so with a Portuguese accent, in the presence of a child, with appropriate gestures and dramatic pauses. The truly brave will also attempt to do their own illustrations.

CHAPTER 33

The grape harvest at Quinta das Carvalhas was abundant in 1942. Ten-year-old Theo — no stranger to the hard work of the vineyard — was tanned and muscular from long days spent in the Portuguese sun.

In addition to the modest pay he earned, the little boy had been promised by his father that, when the harvest was completed, they would take a five-day trip to Lisbon.

It would be Theo's first-ever visit to the big city by the sea. His world previous to that had been confined to Pinhão and nearby villages on the Douro. Childhood in those places had borne in him a love for nature and a preference for quiet that would remain with him the rest of his life.

But the trip to Lisbon changed Theo forever.

It was late October when the party of four — Theo, his parents, and his grandmother — boarded the train in Porto and made the journey south. For five days, the inquisitive mind of the young boy was on full-intake mode. He was awed by the architecture at the monastery of St. Jerome, by the stonework at St. George's castle in the Alfama, by the triumphal arch at the yard of the royal palace, and by a hundred other sights that he observed in a rush. But when he entered the National Museum of Ancient Art, his gait slowed to a crawl as he walked through halls of splendor. Canvas after canvas, tapestry after tapestry, sculpture after sculpture — it was too much to take in. And how, he wondered, does anyone make objects and images of such intricate beauty?

Theo's parents and grandmother, intrigued more by Theo's fascination with the artwork than the art itself, did not rush the boy. They knew his thoughtful disposition and respected his propensity to ponder. They could not feel what he felt, but they knew he was under a spell as he moved slowly from room to room.

At one point in that crawl, sounds of music drew Theo and his family to a large, resonant hall. There, a string quartet — cello, viola, two

violins — played what, to Theo, seemed the song of angels. He stood motionless for a song that had no name, no human author, no category. (Music students might have recognized it as Bach's Art of Fugue.)

When the performance was over, Theo's eyes stung and his ruddy cheeks were wet.

He returned to Pinhão after those five days with ears full of Bach and a mind full of art. He had seen the wider world and knew there was much about it that moved his soul. His life, thereafter, was clearly delineated into Theo-before-Lisbon and Theo-after-Lisbon.

Back at home, there was little he could do to fan the spark that had awakened within him. There were no libraries, no televisions, no radio, no phonographs, and no orchestra nearby. Nonetheless, the spark never died and when he finally left his boyhood home, he made up for lost time. Wherever he lived as an adult, he became a patron of the symphony, with a more than casual interest in the music he admired.

The lives of composers, the historical contexts in which they wrote, the structure of their compositions, the instruments that made the sounds, and the conductors who brought the sounds to life — Theo wanted to know it all.

For him, a concert was simply the final step in a long progression that included seed and forest, logger and craftsman, ink and paper, player and audience, mind and body, heart and soul, heaven and earth. Music was a microcosm. It was portraiture in sound.

No surprise then, that, while Theo was in Golden, a friendship between him and Simone sprang up from their common fondness for the cello.

During the school term, the young cellist was a regular face among Promenade pedestrians. Once you learned Simone's routine, you could almost set your watch by his morning stroll to class. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays during the semester, he would strap his cello on his back, leave his apartment, descend a flight of stairs, exit onto the sidewalk, and begin walking three south blocks to the music school, listing slightly forward, as if fighting a headwind, under the load he carried. He took careful, deliberate steps, staying as close to the storefronts as possible to avoid unintentional collisions with other pedestrians. His head was full of music as he walked.

He had the almond-shaped eyes, broad nose, and dimpled cheeks of his Samoan mother. The full head of dark, tightly curled hair, the coffee-brown skin, and the lean physique were traits of his Congolese father.

He was friendly and conversational if need be, and unafraid to meet the eyes of a stranger. But he was otherwise on the quiet, introverted side of the personality spectrum.

Each morning, he made a stop at the Chalice, where Shep or one of the other baristas, in anticipation of his arrival, stood ready to prepare a breve latte with a garnish of nutmeg. Simone would navigate through the door, still fighting headwind, and take cautious steps to the counter at the back of the shop, mindful that an abrupt turn left or right might strike a chair, a table, or worse, a skull. He would pay for his drink (student discount) and then slowly pivot to retrace his steps toward the exit and out to the sidewalk.

By eight fifteen, he would be sitting in the rehearsal studio, cello in place, when an equally punctual Professor Gobelli would enter the room for their one-hour, one-student class.

Simone had already completed an undergraduate degree at the state university in Washington by the time he came to Golden. He had chosen U of G for further studies largely because of the venerable and celebrated professor and also because he was given a full scholarship with a stipend to do so. He was a serious student with less concern for nightlife and city sizzle than for the purity of his craft. Schools in Chicago, San Francisco, and Baltimore had all courted him for their graduate programs.

But only Golden had the renowned Gobelli.

Simone's parents and family lamented his choice of school, given the distance it placed between him and them, but they understood his decision and were confident it was simply another step toward his eventual renown as a master cellist.

Peering into the rehearsal room on a typical day, one might see Simone's strong hands dancing up and down the cello's neck, his slender fingers sprinting from one note to another in obedience to whatever score was in front of him at the moment.

The good professor would listen, nod, compliment, and correct. He

gave instruction with confidence that it would be accepted and acted upon.

After class, or whenever Simone returned home at day's end, he walked a bit more leisurely than he did in the mornings.

It was on one such stroll, early in his first semester at U of G, that he met Tony the bookseller, a meeting that, like so many in the South, began with a moment of eye contact and a nod of the head.

A simple question was the pull that parted the curtains. "You a student?"

"Yep."

"Well, then let me guess. Either you're in the music school or you're studying to be an astronaut, and that's your spaceship on your back."

Simone smiled broadly, dimples on full display. He was used to jokes about the cello.

In short order, Tony and Simone's acquaintance grew into a friendship of sorts, nourished by frequent repartee and the occasional long conversation.

Tony was pleased that the young student was able to survive, maybe even enjoy, his humor. It was one of the things Simone mentioned most often in emails to his family.

> Mom and Dad, I met a local guy who owns a bookstore near my apartment. His name is Tony. He's gruff but friendly, like Uncle Spoe. He likes to tease me about being a classical musician. He asked me this morning if a cello is like a big ukulele. He called it a nuclear uke and then a nuke uke and then a uke on Viagra.
>
> His store is called the Verbivore. When I asked him where the name came from, he recited a poem he'd written: "Herbivores eat Brussels sprouts, carnivores eat birds, cashivores eat dollar bills, and verbivores eat words."
>
> He likes to joke and play dumb, but I think he's actually pretty bright.

Theo and Simone finally made an appointment to meet at the Chalice and talk music. It was a mid-afternoon, when the shop was quiet. After they each explained how they ended up in Golden, Theo asked Simone to tell him about his cello.

Simone was as happy to answer as Mr. Ponder had been when asked about the history of Ponder House.

"When I first started playing cello in high school, my music teacher found one that I was able to borrow for band class. I played it for three

years, all through school. The neck was bent a little bit, so it was hard to keep in tune, and there was a crack along one of the seams at the top and side, but I didn't mind. I was still able to learn scales and fingering and basic technique on it.

"My parents couldn't afford to buy one for me, so I worked and saved some money to buy one myself. When I graduated from high school, I found one for twelve hundred dollars. That one had some flaws, too, but it was a definite improvement. When I auditioned at university for the orchestra, the professors all suggested I get a better instrument. I wanted to, but I just couldn't afford it.

"So, I kept using the one I had. When I had recitals or concerts, my professor would let me practice and perform with one of hers. I kept saving my money, but I knew it would be a while before I could buy a really good one. They're pretty expensive, you know."

Theo nodded. He knew very well.

"In my senior year at university, my grandmother died. My mother's mother. She lived with us when I was growing up. I was really close to her. Most people thought I was crazy to study cello, but not her. She loved to hear me play, even when I was just beginning. Her ears were very kind.

"When she died, she left me some money. I didn't think she had a thing in the world, but she had saved some money somehow. She left it all to me with a note that said 'Buy a cello, and play for the angels.' It was almost fourteen thousand dollars. I couldn't believe it. I took the little bit I'd saved and put it all together and started looking for the cello of my dreams.

"It took a year, but I finally found it. Or it found me. My professor told me about it. There was a man who got Parkinson's and couldn't play it anymore, so he asked my professor if she knew anybody who would appreciate and take good care of it. Lucky me. The man could have charged me three times what I paid for it. So, Mr. Theo, I play an 1859 Kriner, from Munich. To me, it is a masterpiece."

"It *is* a masterpiece," Theo agreed. "So, let me guess. The top is made of spruce, and the sides, back, and neck are made of maple. The headstock is scrolled, similar to a Stradivarius, and is also made of maple. At low C, it makes the floor shiver."

Simone grinned proudly. “All true. I’m impressed. How do you know so much about cellos? Do you play?”

“Ahh, I wish I could, but I leave that to artists like you. I have no talent for music, except to listen. But what one loves, one learns about. I am not sure why I love the cello so much, but I do. I once heard Casals play in Paris. I think I was never the same after that.”

“Really, you heard Casals? *The* Pablo Casals?

Theo nodded. “It was remarkable. Indescribable.”

“I first heard his recordings of the Bach Suite when I was in high school,” Simone said. “That’s what made me want to learn cello.”

Theo smiled. “And your bow? What type of bow do you use?”

“Well, I hope someday to own an Emil Werner, but for now I play with a DZ Strand, number 805. Ebony frog. Quad-A Mongolian horsehair. Twenty-eight point three inches long. Seventy-eight grams. Pirastro, medium rosin.”

Theo beamed. “Excellent! If I’m not mistaken, that one is made of Brazilwood, yes?”

Simone nodded. “Correct.”

Theo said, “Which means that since it comes from Brazil, it sings in Portuguese.”

It took a moment for Simone to understand Theo’s humor.

“I hope I will get to hear you and your cello perform someday.”

“That would be nice. When I first heard Professor Gobelli play it, I almost cried. I heard music and tones that I never knew were there. My grandmother would have been so happy to hear it. Ya’ know, my cello is sorta like a son or a daughter to me. That’s why I carry it with me everywhere. I don’t leave it at the school. This ‘hockey player,’ as Tony calls it, is my grandmother’s voice to me.”

“And have you honored her request? Do you play for the angels?”

“I try.”

“And when is the next time you will play for humans?”

Simone told Theo of upcoming events: a quartet performance, a wedding, a concert of the university chamber orchestra. He was also beginning to prepare for his recital the following spring. That recital would be Simone’s last step before completion of his master’s degree. It might also lead to the next step on his career path. Representatives

from symphonies around the country, at the invitation of Professor Gobelli, would be in attendance that night to assess Simone's proficiency. His focus and diligence, therefore, even this far in advance, were understandable.

The recital was almost a year away, but Theo made a mental note of the event.

CHAPTER 34

Though Theo did his best to keep the bestowals a secret, word began to circulate about the curious benefactor of Broadway.

When he wished to buy a portrait or portraits, he would do so when the shop was empty or uncrowded. On other occasions, he might write a note or whisper instructions to Shep who, on his own time, would remove the designated portrait or portraits from the wall, wrap them in brown paper, and, later, hand them over to Theo as inconspicuously as possible.

From the outset, Shep had promised confidentiality, as did Asher and Tony once they learned of Theo's intent.

And yet, despite those measures to keep his kindness below the radar, it could not be entirely unnoticed.

The portraits themselves ended up in an interesting assortment of places.

Most were displayed on prominent wall space in homes throughout the city.

One, of a softball coach, was placed in a high school trophy case.

One, of a little boy, was mailed overseas to his father, a soldier who was doing a tour of duty in Syria.

Another, of an old woman, was placed in the casket of her husband at his passing.

One, by special permission, was sent, unframed, to a death row inmate. It was the portrait of a woman who had been his foster parent when he was a teenager. She had continued to write him letters until the week before her passing.

Most of the people who received portraits from Theo believed themselves to be the sole objects of his generosity and, hence, never suspected they were part of a larger endeavor. All would have been at least a little surprised to learn how many others eventually met Theo at the Fedder.

Word of "this old man who gives away portraits" eventually reached the desk of a local newspaper reporter. When she contacted Theo about doing a story and a blog post, he shuddered at the prospect, imagining some cringeworthy article about 'a clandestine portrait fairy flitting through the fountains of the Promenade,' or worse.

Instead of declining her request, however, he scheduled a meeting two weeks out at the Fedder. He requested that she come alone. And, emphatically, no photographer. She agreed.

When she arrived, a very full-sized woman in her forties, Theo greeted her — Katherine Lesker — with a bow and a smile. After introductions and before she could turn on a recorder or launch into her intended interview, he took charge of the conversation. His voice was soft but authoritative.

"Ms. Katherine, might I tell you a wee bit of my story first, off the record? I have a favor to ask of you, and you will understand it better if you let me explain."

She leaned forward with all the attentiveness expected of one in her profession as Theo shared the sparsest of details about his life and then explained what he'd been doing with the portraits. While he spoke, she was composing a story in her mind, a local-interest, feel-good story. Accordingly, she was more than a little disappointed when he asked, almost pleaded, that she not write about it in the newspaper.

He explained, "I never did this to be noticed, and I fear that, if you write about it, I will not be able to continue my work. The anonymity and unexpectedness of the gifts are almost as important as the portraits themselves. Does that make sense?"

"I suppose so." The letdown was obvious in her voice. "But the story is *so* interesting, and I know people would enjoy it. They would be inspired by your example. We need some positive stories these days. Wouldn't you like to inspire others?"

"What I want is to bless the ones I give the portraits to." He paused.

“When you’re as old as me, Ms. Katherine, you’ll have seen lots of very good intentions end up very badly, intentions that might have been better served if they had been acted on quietly. There are some, of course, whose generosity is inspiring, but so many others, tsk, tsk, tsk . . .”

Katherine offered no argument.

Theo continued, “I would guess you’ve read Mr. Wordsworth, perhaps in a literature class at some point in your studies. He once wrote that the best portion of a good person’s life is ‘the *little, nameless, unremembered* acts of kindness and love.’ Tintern Abbey, yes? Little. Nameless. Unremembered. I think it has never been our nature to think that way, but especially now, we like ‘big’ and ‘viral’ and all that. But I think Mr. Wordsworth was right.

“At this point, the handful of people who’ve gotten their portraits — on this very bench, in fact — only know that a stranger, for some strange reason, gave them a gift. If those people read an article that focuses on me the least bit then, whether you mean for it to be or not, the gift would be diminished somehow.”

Katherine tried to follow his reasoning. She was used to interviewing people — praise-seekers and applause-junkies — who were all too eager to talk about themselves. And while she appreciated the old man’s humility and selflessness, she hated to lose such an interesting story. Their conversation had already provided enough material for a readable piece, and Minnette, who had brought Theo to Katherine’s notice, could provide background and context for the article.

“There is another teaching about kindness,” Theo said. “‘Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’ In other words, do good, but try to do it without notice or hope of reward. Ms. Katherine, I’m trying to live by that rule. I’ve not always been that way. Years ago, when I lived in another city, I made a gift to a local school. They put my name on the building — it is there even now — and they had a big celebration. For some reason, at the end of that day, I felt a big emptiness. I have wished many times since then that I had done it some other way.

“For me, for now, today, ‘little, nameless, unremembered’ sounds right. I wish we could teach that to our children. Do you have children,

Katherine?”

Katherine nodded. “I do. Teenagers. A boy and a girl. And you’re right. They could use a dose of what you’re talking about.”

“Ms. Katherine, I don’t know how long I’ll be here in your city. Maybe not for long. But I will make you a promise. Before I leave, if you still want an interview, I will give you, *only you*, an interview that you can print when I’m gone. Will that work?”

She pretended a smile. “You don’t have to make me a promise. If you don’t want to do an interview, your secret is safe with me.” She snickered. “You’ll hardly ever hear a reporter say those words. And if you do, don’t be too quick to believe them.”

“Katherine, I have a question for you. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to work as a street musician?”

“Not really. Why?”

“There is a young fellow who plays on the sidewalk near the Chalice.

I’ll bet he would be an interesting story. And he might appreciate the attention.”

She chuckled. “Maybe a feel-good story?”

She put her recorder away and prepared to leave. Theo reached beside himself on the bench. “Katherine, have you got a few minutes more?”

He handed her the wrapped package and gestured for her to open it.

Katherine had never once thought of herself as pretty. Not once in her entire life.

Not as a child. Not as a teenager. Not as a woman.

Her childhood had been a minefield of taunts about her size and plainness. She grew up avoiding mirrors and cameras. Being a journalist as an adult had allowed her to work in the cloistered isolation of empty rooms where her physical appearance was of little importance and safely out of view.

How Theo had obtained a recent photograph of her, from which Asher was able to render a drawing, was his and Mr. Ponder’s secret.

When Katherine peeled back the wrapping paper and realized what she was holding, she attempted to speak, visibly caught her breath, and blushed. Her eyes filled, and she tried to smile through awkwardly quivering lips. The realization that someone had paid such attention to

her face — *her* face — that someone had drawn her with such tenderness, had deemed her worthy of such meticulous effort and artistry, reduced her to meaningful silence. She and Theo gazed at the portrait as she gathered enough composure to speak.

"I don't even know what to say. It's, umm . . ." She hesitated, fearful of flattering herself. "He did a beautiful job."

"Well, the artist simply drew what he saw, and what he saw — *who* he saw — is a work of art."

More silence.

Katherine turned to look at Theo. "So, this is what you do?"

Theo raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"And moments like this are what you'd like me not to write about?"

He nodded again. "Ms. Katherine, I fear that no matter what you write, it would put this all in jeopardy, no matter how carefully you choose your words. I am amazed at the effect these portraits have on people. Your reaction is typical of what happens each time I do this. No credit to me, mind you. It is a gift of God. And this Asher Glissen has a remarkable ability — one little appreciated, I'm afraid — for helping people see themselves for who they really are. Thank you for understanding."

Katherine's eyes remained on the portrait.

“Mr. Theo, when I was a little girl in grade school, here in Golden, my father lost his job. We were never very well off to begin with, but for a couple of years, we were really poor. We lived in a rented trailer in a rough part of the city. It shamed my dad that he couldn’t take care of us, even though he did everything he could. He’d had a really hard life, and I realize now he was probably a very sick man. As a little girl, I didn’t understand or know anything about that.

“For two years, I never got new clothes or shoes. I was already a fat little girl. You’d think poor kids would all be as skinny as rails, but somehow, I just got bigger and bigger, and my clothes got tighter and tighter. I was easy prey for kids looking for somebody to pick on. I think my dad knew me and my siblings were suffering in our own ways, but he was powerless to help, and he was suffocating in his own disgrace.

“So, one day, he just up and left us. Just disappeared. We never heard from him again. I don’t know to this day if he’s even alive. I’ve always feared the worst. But for a young girl who already feels badly about herself, it cuts pretty deep for your dad to walk out on you. After he left, my mother worked as a waitress and washed people’s laundry at a laundromat, but we were always behind on everything.

“I’ve spent my whole life being a little girl in those too-small clothes in that rundown trailer park. That’s the picture of myself that’s stuck in my head, and it doesn’t look at all like this one.” She gestured toward the portrait.

After a moment, Theo spoke. “Then I propose that we make a trade. Give me that old picture in your head, and take this new one home with you.”

And then, like schoolchildren, they acted out a mime.

Theo held out his hand, palm up.

He nodded toward the top of her head.

She somehow intuited what he wanted her to do.

She raised her hand, fingertips together, to her temple and pretended to pull an object from her mind.

She held her hand over Theo’s and opened her fingers, then dropped the hostile mental image into his palm.

He closed his hand around it and put it in his coat pocket.

With his free hand, he tapped the portrait. “Katherine, never forget. A work of art.”

They stood to their farewells.

Theo promised once again that, when his business in Golden was done, he would call and give her an interview.

She promised once again to keep their secret.

And she did.

CHAPTER 35

Once Theo had gained a circle of acquaintances along the Promenade, his daily strolls became peppered with short, unscheduled conversations. He learned that those visits were called “bumping into” or “running into” someone, though no such collisions were ever involved.

Such encounters typically occurred along the sidewalk or at places like the Chalice, where Theo might hear his name or feel a tap on the shoulder and turn to see a familiar face standing behind him. Brief, friendly exchanges would ensue and, on occasion, real conversation would bubble up.

Theo was not particularly comfortable with small talk. His own active mind and colorful thoughts were so engaging that shallow babble felt at times like an intrusion, an interruption, a subtraction. That said, and all because of his capacious spirit, sidewalk chats became a welcome part of his days. He was a master at adapting the depth and tone of his comments to whomever he was with at a given moment. Be it a twelve-year-old NASCAR fan, a one-armed bartender, a homeless woman, or a disgruntled accountant, he could connect. And he always listened with interest. Genuine interest. Not fakery.

Still his preference was for weighty questions and thoughtful answers, a preference that was rarely obliged.

To compensate for the deficit, he could always resort to books.

On this occasion, Theo bumped into Asher at the Chalice. They were third and sixth in line, waiting to place their morning coffee orders, when Asher called his name. Theo moved back to fifth position in the line.

After greetings, Theo scanned the walls of the room and lowered his voice for the sake of privacy.

"Asher, in every face I detect sadness."

A crease of curiosity formed between Asher's eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, it is subtle, and maybe it takes an old man — an expert in sadness — to see it, but it is there in every portrait, in some more than others. It is not gloomy or angry or even terribly obvious. It is like a weariness or an unmet longing or a disappointment; something we inherit from those who lived before us. But to these old eyes, it is in every face, *the* universal affliction. It is what gives such gravitas to your portraits and makes them so believable. Even when your subjects are smiling, the shadow of sadness is there. And so far, my meetings at the Fedder only confirm my suspicion."

Asher mulled over Theo's remarks.

"I never really thought of it that way. I certainly don't do 'sadness' intentionally."

"Ah," Theo nodded his affirmation, "the mystery of art."

Asher leaned in and spoke softly. "So, you're an expert in sadness?"

Theo shrugged. "I suppose anyone as old as me could say the same.

When we're young, we're usually too busy or too self-absorbed to see it, but by the time one is almost ninety, this world has beat the sadness into him quite deeply. Every week there is some tragedy or reminder to keep it alive and well."

It was an unusual subject to discuss while standing in line for coffee. They placed their orders, stepped away from the counter, and continued talking.

"Theo, I appreciate that you're such a sensitive man. You have a tender heart."

"Not tender, Asher. Broken. My expertise in sadness is hard-earned. But I realize more and more that it is a gift. Living with sadness, accepting it, is easier than trying to pretend it isn't there. It is another of life's great mysteries that sadness and joy can coexist so compatibly with one another. In fact, I wonder if, on this side of heaven, either one can be complete without the other."

"You don't strike me as a sad man, Theo. If you are, you're good at disguising it."

As if to prove the truth of Asher's observation, Theo grinned. The resident sparkle in his eyes rose to the surface. Gleamed.

"Thank you. I hope it's true. There is no virtue in advertising one's sadness. But there is no wisdom in denying it either. And there is the beautiful possibility that great love can grow out of sadness if it is well-tended. Sadness can make us bitter or wise. We get to choose."

"So, I do portraits of sadness?" Asher muttered to himself. "Is that a compliment?"

Theo chuckled. "It is a very high compliment, young man. A very high compliment indeed. Perhaps I am mistaken but, at some point, if we are wise, we must all confront our sadness, our brokenness, our disappointment. I am quite certain that your portraits help some people, in a very tender and courteous way, to ask themselves, maybe for the first time, '*Who is that person? What do I know to be true, really true, about that face*?' . . . Asher, we are masters at masking our sadness, but deep down inside, if we are honest, we know that there is an unsatisfied longing deep inside all of us. Your portraits invite people to be alone and quiet and truthful with themselves; to admit the longing and to discover the goodness in their sadness. Maybe?"

Asher held his peace, oblivious to the presence of customers around him. Narrowed eyes and wrinkled brow expressed his keen concentration.

“Asher, please don’t misunderstand me. You don’t draw portraits of sadness; you draw portraits of people. Sadness is only one part. There is beauty and gladness and playfulness too. It’s all there. In elegant proportion.”

Theo directed Asher’s attention to the portrait of a forty-ish young woman on the wall directly in front of them. She was smiling. “Do you see it, Asher? There is something, mostly in her eyes, that hints at something other than happiness. Do you agree?”

Asher knew the woman in the frame. He also knew her painful story. “Theo, I wish I had an hour to talk about this more but I’ve got an appointment in just a few minutes. Let’s talk about this at the studio one day next week. But here’s a question before I go. What about the child? That one there?” Asher pointed to the beaming face of a young boy.

Theo looked. “OK. That one: no sadness. But draw him again in thirty years.”

CHAPTER 36

The relationships of Theo and Mr. Ponder as landlord/tenant, consultant/client, and confidant/confider remained steadfast during the Golden year. But after the first few weeks had passed, their status as peers and business associates evolved unmistakably into a friendship.

Theo was grateful for his younger acquaintances — Shep, Kendrick, Basil, Simone, Asher, even Lamisha — and was honored they had adopted him into their circle. But there was much about their world that he did not understand — technology, music, social media, virtual reality, digital everything. He was an old man and an old soul, out of step with the gadgetry and zeitgeist of the times.

Having one person, an almost-contemporary, with whom he could be unguarded, someone with whom he could speak freely about his past, a confederate and co-conspirator with whom he could quietly carry out his desire to be helpful, an intellectual equal with whom he could discuss a wide range of topics and questions, and a source of information from which he could learn about the city and its people — all meant that Theo often made the inconvenient walk from his apartment to Mr. Ponder's office.

The current of respect and fondness ran in the other direction as well. From the start, Mr. Ponder opined that, in Theo, he had met a superior, a mentor, a rarity. His knowledge of the man's background only affirmed that opinion. He was happy for any chance they might have to spend time together, and his small workload easily accommodated Theo's spontaneous visits.

Mrs. Gidley had been instructed to allow those visits whenever possible. At first, she was not a fan of the arrangement. To her sense of propriety, there was something undignified about unscheduled, unannounced intrusions. But soon enough, she learned to bend the old protocols.

It might happen, for example, that Theo would walk into Mr. Ponder's office, fresh from the Chalice, open book in hand, and ask Mrs. Gidley if he might have a minute with the consultant. Permission granted, he would walk to the second floor and enter the hallowed space thusly:

"Mr. Ponder, may I read something to you? I wonder what you think about this bit by Mr. Tolstoy."

Or:

"James, can you explain about the farmers' strike in India? I read about it in the *Times* this morning. Do you think their grievance is valid?"

Even when Mr. Ponder could offer no answer or insight to Theo's questions, they enjoyed 'good talk' together if only for a handful of minutes.

As the friendship between the two men deepened, Mrs. Gidley detected a subtle but notable change in Mr. Ponder's demeanor. He was still the serious, dignified man of business he had always been, but there were flashes of cheerfulness and energy that could only be attributed to the old man's influence.

It was not unusual for Mr. Ponder to leave a magazine article, a newspaper story, or a book excerpt on the secretary's desk with a note:

Please make a copy of this for Theo. We talked about this topic yesterday, and I think he might be interested in what this writer says about it.

Or a request:

Please remind Theo about the chamber orchestra concert on the 18th. Mention that they'll be playing Copland.

Or:

Anita, please send flowers to Theo for his birthday next week. Maybe something native to Portugal. Arrange delivery with the florist.

To which Mrs. Gidley replied:

I had an arrangement sent to Mr. Theo from Blossomopolis. I will open the back gate for delivery. Would you like me to order a cake and have lunch here at the office one day next week? Invite Asher?"

She, too, was being changed by the old man's presence.

Once her initial skepticism and distrust of Theo had been assuaged, and the more she bought into the goodness of the bestowals, a lightness crept into her disposition. There was a noticeable new enthusiasm about her work. She even became giggly at times about belonging to his cabal of generosity. She knew not to ask too much about the individual bestowals; that was Theo's private domain, and he tended to be protective of matters discussed at those meetings. But she was intrigued, inspired, and entertained by the few bits of information he was willing to share. The project seemed worthy of a movie.

After years of settled routine at Ponder House — a more honest word might have been "boredom" — Mrs. Gidley was enjoying the sense of mild adventure that Theo had brought to their work. The portrait giftings, the medical treatments for Lamisha, and the small charitable purchases that showed up on his credit card bills each month (which

Mrs. Gidley paid from his trust account) were a stark departure from the work she had done for decades at the firm.

Even before Theo moved to Golden, she had felt the slow contraction of a soul that had given itself too completely, and with too great a sense of importance, to the marketplace. Theo's creative generosity was a welcome disruption to business as usual.

She still knew almost nothing about his past, and she still held onto some small, gnawing suspicions about the man and his motives. She had racked her brain and combed through the office files for any memory of him as a previous client of Ponder House. No luck on either front.

She had learned over the years to live with partial truth about many of the Ponder House clientele. She resigned herself to the fact that Theo would be one more in a long line of mysteries, though she beheld him with a much keener sense of wonder.

Unwittingly, Mr. James Ponder and Mrs. Anita Gidley had become apprentices in the world according to Theo.

CHAPTER 37

Mrs. Gidley once offered the suggestion to Theo that he simply buy all the portraits at once, schedule a public gala at the Chalice, call in the television cameras, and make a grand presentation. Get it over with in one fell swoop.

“It would certainly save both of us a lot of work, wouldn’t it?” Theo replied. “But the giving is part of the gift. And think of all the stories I would miss if we did them all at once.”

If Theo had followed her suggestion, he would never have met Cleave Torber.

But he didn’t, and so he did.

The gift was meant for a young woman named Clarise.

Her portrait showed a beautifully proportioned face with sensuous lips and serious, half-sleepy, intelligent eyes. Her expression seemed cautious and hesitant, perhaps even afraid. Whatever it was, there was a mystique about her. Her straight dark hair was pulled back with loose strands at the temples. She had prominent cheekbones and a slender neck that tilted slightly to her right so that she looked at the camera from the left corner of her eyes. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties.

Hers was a face worthy of a magazine cover.

It was also a face that, in addition to being colorful or interesting in some indefinable way, had suffered loss. Theo saw sadness in her features.

For some reason, he had doubts that she would accept his invitation. Still, he arrived at the Fedder half an hour early and took his place on the bench. The Promenade was quieter than usual for a Thursday evening in June.

At seven o’clock, no Clarise.

At seven-oh-five, one Cleave Torber.

His steps were hurried and insistent. His eyes were locked on Theo as he approached the fountain.

He was clearly a man on a mission.

Under different circumstances, Theo might have noted the young man’s striking good looks. He was as handsome as Clarise was beautiful and just as worthy of a magazine cover. They had obviously chosen each other with their eyes.

But the slender, muscular Cleave Torber who descended on Theo like a dark cloud was disfigured with anger. Everything attractive about him was twisted with contempt and jealousy. And everything about him as he approached the Fedder — his stride, his facial expression, and

eventually his tone of voice — advertised forthcoming violence.

He stepped close to the bench, set his feet like a gunfighter, arms slightly away from his sides, and looked down imperiously at the old man. He wasted no time on courtesies as he spit a question at Theo.

“Are you the one who wrote this to my girlfriend?”

He held out the letter Theo had sent to the young woman. Theo recognized it immediately. “Yes, I wrote it. But is Clarise going to —”

“I don’t know who you think you are, old man, and I don’t appreciate that prissy ass artist doing a portrait of her and hanging it in that coffee shop without my permission. If you weren’t so old, I’d kick your ass across the river.”

Torber hovered over Theo, so close to the bench that Theo could not have stood if he’d wanted to. The old man looked into the anger-filled eyes peering down at him and tried to cobble a sentence together. He was less afraid than confused. Surely he could convince the man to see reason.

“Please, sir,” Theo said, “you don’t understand. I only wanted —”

“Oh, I understand. Believe me, I understand. Some sick old man is trying to hit on my girlfriend. You pervert. You’re the one who don’t understand.”

Theo held up a hand, palm out, as if trying to hush a crowd.

“Hey, Cleave, is something wrong?” a voice asked.

Torber turned.

The question had come from Derrick Prentiss. He had been in court that day and was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and burgundy necktie. He and Torber were acquaintances. Both had grown up in Golden.

“Yeah, there’s something wrong. I’m glad you’re here. This old man is a predator or something, and he was trying to meet with Clarise behind my back. I ought to have him arrested. *Can* I have him arrested?”

Derrick waved off the suggestion. “Cleave, I know this gentleman and I can assure you, he’s not doing anything wrong. Just cool down. Go on home. You know you can’t afford to get in any more trouble.”

Torber stepped back from the bench and turned to Derrick. “You need to warn him to mind his own business!”

Derrick nodded. Years in the DA's office had taught him that silence was often the best response to anger.

Theo rose from the bench and addressed his accuser with remarkable composure. "Please, sir." He held out the portrait as a peace offering. It was still wrapped in brown paper. "Sir, I'm very sorry. I did not mean to upset you. Would you please give this to Ms. Clarise for me?"

Torber snatched the picture. "Here's what I'll do for Ms. Clarise."

He took the portrait and slammed it to the ground at his feet. Glass broke inside the brown paper. Torber stomped the portrait twice and then ground it beneath the heel of his boot, his eyes fixed on Theo. "You and yo' damn picture."

Passersby slowed down and gawked at the argument in process.

Derrick considered calling the police but refrained. He was about to speak when Theo, horror-stricken at the sacrilege he had just witnessed, straightened up to his full stature and stepped toward Torber. The old man's lips went bloodless with rage, and his eyes matched the ferocity in Torber's face, measure for measure.

Derrick thrust himself between the two men and put a hand on Theo's shoulder to hold him in place. Then he turned to Torber. "Leave. Now! Go!"

Theo spit his own words at Torber, leaning around Derrick to do so. "You are a disgrace. You are a pig of a human, a disgrace. Idiota! Babaca! Filho da puta! How dare you? How dare you? How dare you? Damn you, filho da puta!"

The desecration of the portrait had awakened and infuriated a sleeping bear.

Cleave Torber was across Broadway before Theo's bilingual outburst subsided.

"He's gone, Mr. Theo. You gonna be OK?" Derrick took his hand off Theo's shoulder.

Trembling, the old man took a deep breath. Then another. "Yes, I'm fine. But what a shame. What a disgrace. Just look." His words were hurried and clipped as he stared at the ground.

Derrick bent down and picked up the remains of the portrait. Broken glass rattled like coins inside the wrapping paper. Theo received it as if it were the corpse of a small animal. He shook his head and clenched

his jaw in disgust.

Another deep breath, in and out. And then, clearly befuddled, Theo turned and looked intently at Derrick. ”Forgive me, sir, but . . . do I know you?”

“Well, sort of. My name is Derrick Prentiss. A few weeks ago, you gave a portrait to my wife, Minnette. I was sitting right over there the whole time y’all talked.” He pointed to the bench on the far side of the fountain. “This isn’t exactly what I had in mind, but I’ve been hoping I might get to thank you someday. You made quite an impression on my wife. She still talks about you.”

Theo groaned. “I will be terribly embarrassed if you tell her about the impression I just made on *you*. My ugly, angry self. Forgive me, please.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. I’d say you had good reason to be angry. Minnette and I both grew up knowing that guy. His name is Cleave Torbe. He’s always been a hothead and a bully. His temper and jealousy have gotten him in lots of trouble before. Our DA’s office is real familiar with Mr. Torber. I don’t know why on earth any woman would put up with him.”

Derrick looked at the crumpled mess in Theo’s hands. “I’m afraid he’s ruined the portrait.” Theo shook his head and tsked.

“Uncle Asher could do another one of her, but it might be better for Clarise if her picture’s not on the wall.”

Theo agreed.

“Mr. Theo, you be careful. I know your intentions are good, but some folks might not understand your kindness.”

Theo nodded but made no comment.

Derrick looked at his watch. “I hate to hurry off but Minnette is waiting for me, and I need to run. Would you like me to walk you home?”

“No, thank you. I am OK. I am just upset. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re sort of pale, Mr. Theo. I could call an officer and have them take you home. I’ll be happy to.”

“No, no. Really, I’m fine. But thank you. And please give my love to Minnette.”

Derrick agreed and said goodbye. After he crossed Broadway, he

turned to look back at the fountain. Theo was on his bench, eyes downcast, fixed on the mangled work of Asher Glissen.

As he walked home, still rattled by the confrontation, Theo questioned the wisdom of doing further bestowals. Should he stop? Might he be putting himself in harm's way? Or worse, might he be putting *others* in harm's way?

In short order, he dismissed those concerns. After all, he had known, and had been warned by Mr. Ponder, that his generosity might be misunderstood. One bad bestowal was no reason to derail the project. Theo concluded that he should, he *must,* continue the bestowals.

He would consult with Mr. Ponder and Mrs. Gidley about how to move forward. But move forward he would.

Later that night, he stood in his kitchen and removed the torn brown paper that still enshrouded the portrait. Shards of glass fell onto the countertop. The frame was broken in multiple places, and the drawing itself was torn, creased, and punctured.

On the cheek of the beautiful, unsmiling, cautious face, a boot print was visible, like a fresh bruise.

Theo took the drawing out of the frame and threw away the broken hardware, holding the face before him. *Desecration. It is a desecration*, he thought. He opened a drawer and laid the portrait down with the solemnity of a burial. Then he closed the drawer.

***I have now met a Southerner whom I do not like*.**

CHAPTER 38

Simone and his cello had been doing battle for days with a challenging section of a toccata capricciosa. It was a mere forty seconds of music, but it had already cost him hours of practice and fine tuning.

It was another late night, midnight, and he was alone in the rehearsal studio. The college was all his at such an hour, quiet and ideal for concentration.

What does one do, or more to the point, what does a young cellist striving for perfection do when faced with a complex, daunting task that leads to frustration and defeat?

He closes the score and plays something familiar from memory, something he has previously mastered, something to reestablish his confidence, even if it is as simple and commonplace as a children's melody or a beginner's piece.

Simone chose a song he had learned during his university days in Washington, when he was part of an ensemble that played for a production of *Porgy and Bess*.

The sultry, sweat-dripping notes of "Summertime" echoed down the hallway as Simone, eyes closed, swayed to the languid melody.

Mr. Gershwin would have been very pleased at the slow, weary voice with which the cello drew out the notes and evoked a muggy night in Charleston. Simone channeled Louis and Ella themselves as he droned the well-known tune.

Blues on a cello?

Simone reached the final note of the song and pulled the bow to the last possible millimeter of sound.

The room went silent. Almost.

From down the hall came a voice, as if the last note from the cello was reversing course and returning to Simone in reply. It was the sound of singing. Not loud. Obviously not meant to be heard but heard nonetheless.

"And yo' mama's good lookin'."

Simone's trained ear could tell that the voice was on pitch, that it possessed feeling, and that it knew the song well. All this at a barely audible volume.

He put down his cello, walked to the door, and looked down the hallway.

A cart, laden with various brooms and cleaning supplies, stood unattended.

Simone was aware that custodians cleaned the classrooms at the end of each day. He often heard the sounds of vacuum cleaners, floor buffers, and trash cans being emptied on the late nights when he practiced alone.

He was usually too focused on his own work, and the janitors too hurried in theirs, for them to notice one another.

As Simone stood in the doorway of his rehearsal room listening for more sounds of singing, a stocky young man rounded the corner to retrieve something from his cart.

Their eyes met, and a moment of awkward silence ensued. Both looked as if they had been caught doing something wrong.

“Man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

At that moment, the singer in the hallway was fearful of getting into trouble and losing his job, something he could ill afford to do. Policy dictated that maintenance personnel were never to interrupt students or faculty from their study or rehearsal.

Sensing a measure of distress in the custodian’s voice, Simone quickly absolved him of any trespass and walked toward the cart. If there was a caste system that separated musicians from maintenance men, he was unaware of it.

“Was that you singing? That was excellent.”

Both faces showed signs of relief and warmth.

“I couldn’t hear you very well,” Simone continued, “but what I heard was really nice.”

“Well, thank you.”

“My name is Simone Lavoie. I’m a student here.” He held out his hand.

“I’m Kendrick Whitaker. I work here.”

“I thought you might be a student yourself, a vocal performance major or something.”

Kendrick laughed, not quite grasping the compliment he had been paid.

Simone asked, “How did you know that song I was playing?”

It was admittedly an old song, hardly in fashion, even if there were a few thousand recorded renditions of it in circulation.

“I learned it in high school,” Kendrick replied. “My music teacher made me sing it one year at the school talent show. She made me listen to lots of different people sing it and then she told me to put my own voice on it. That’s a good song, y’know.”

Simone nodded, intrigued. “Did you ever sing after that?”

Kendrick shrugged. “Not really. Sing for fun, you know, but that’s about all. Sometimes me and my little girl go to church with my grandmama, and we sing there. Ol’ stuff, ol’ gospel stuff.”

“You’ve got a nice voice, Kendrick. What other things do you like to sing?”

Simone and Kendrick talked for a short while, mostly about music. Kendrick would have asked questions about the cello, but knew he was

supposed to be working. Policy.

Simone apologized for interrupting him. Kendrick apologized again for interrupting *him*.

“Of all the versions you listened to, who sang ‘Summertime’ the best?” Simone asked.

“Aw, maaaan, that’s tough. There are some good ones. But for me it’s gotta be Miz Ella. She owned it.”

Simone nodded. “I agree.”

“Well, I better get back to work. Nice to meet you, Limone. Is that right? Limone?”

Simone laughed.

“Close! It’s Simone. Simone Lavoie. But sometimes people get it backwards. Limone Savoy. That’s got a nice ring to it.”

Kendrick put both hands on his cart to return to work.

“You keep singing,” Simone said.

Kendrick smiled. “And you keep playing.”

An hour later, Simone packed up his cello, put it on his back, and locked the door to the studio. As he stepped out of the building, he saw Kendrick sitting on a bench nearby. They exchanged hellos.

Kendrick held up his cell phone. “I’m just taking a break and checkin’ on my little girl.”

“Is she up this late?”

“Naw, naw. She’s asleep, but I got this camera thing in her room, so I can look in at her. I got a friend who gave it to me, so I could watch her while she’s in the hospital. She had to go back in last week to have a surgery.”

“Is she OK?”

Kendrick told the story of Lamisha’s accident and injury.

“She got a real nice doctor, Dr. Good — that’s what we call him ‘cause his last name is kind of hard to say. He’s from Nigeria. He’s the one who did the operation. My daughter’s gonna have a limp, but she’s gonna be pretty much able to do everything like everybody else. We thought she might lose her leg, but the doctor fixed her. We’re blessed. You wanna see her?”

Kendrick tapped a couple of times on the small screen. Simone sat down beside him, leaned in close, and looked at the picture.

The hospital room was dimly lit. A bed, a number of pole-mounted monitors, an IV bag, and walls in the stark institutional color of no-color surrounded a sleeping girl with intricately braided hair.

Her leg was held slightly elevated and immobile by various gadgets. She had the appearance of a small-scale suspension bridge — cables, wires, rods.

“They have to put all that there so her bone heals right,” Kendrick explained. “It hurts her a lot, but Dr. Good says they gotta do it. He gives her medicine to help her sleep.”

“That’s quite a cast on her leg,” Simone observed.

And it was. The doctor had allowed Lamisha to select the color herself. It was one way to let the young patient feel that she was in control of at least a small part of her healing.

She had chosen the brightest shade of blue on the menu of options. Not quite blue as morpho but close. It glowed in the half light of the room.

She was sleeping soundly.

A figure entered the camera view. A nurse?

On the small screen, it was hard to tell.

"That's him," Kendrick said. "That's my friend who gave me the camera."

Simone leaned in closer, squinted and frowned. "Is that . . . Is that Theo?'

Kendrick's face lit up. "You know Mr. Theo?"

"I do. He's sort of a neighbor. I see him on the Promenade a lot. Why is he there?"

Kendrick recounted the friendship of the old man and the little girl. "Well, Mr. Theo loves my little girl, and when she's in the hospital, he goes to check on her, and when she's home he comes over every week to read with her. He can't sleep sometimes at night. That's what he told me. So, maybe that's why he's there so late tonight.

"Somethin' about Mr. Theo, when he comes around, they take real good care of Lamisha. They think he's important or somethin'. My grandmama says he's an angel."

"How'd you meet him?"

Kendrick told the story of the bestowal. "It still seems crazy to me and I still don't know why he's so nice to us, but he's a good man. A for-real good man."

"How long will he stay there tonight?"

"I don't know. Till it's time to go, I guess."

Kendrick's work break was over. When he turned his cell phone off, Theo was still sitting in the chair beside Lamisha's bed, hands in his lap and his eyes closed. It was a comforting scene.

For the second time that night, Kendrick and Simone said their farewells. Kendrick returned to the bright interior of the classroom suite in Symphony Hall, Simone to the misty darkness of the

Promenade.

CHAPTER 39

By some act of Providence, or by operation of some force field that surrounded the bench, or by some duly recognized rule of adverse possession, Theo managed, with rare exception, to sit at the same bench — the one on the south side of the fountain — each time he carried out a bestowal.

In his letters, he still instructed all his beneficiaries to look for the heather-green flat cap, but he might just as well have said, "I will be sitting on the bench closest to the Eye of God."

In his mind, it became *his* bench.

It was big enough for four adults, but he claimed the entire length for himself and his invited guest. The presence of third parties would have been an awkward distraction from an already awkward transaction.

His strategy was simple: arrive early; sit in the middle of the bench; put hat, jacket, umbrella, or portrait on open spaces to indicate they were all "occupied"; and then politely shoo away any would-be intruders.

There *was*, though, one occasion in early summer that called for more creative measures.

Theo and his guest, a woman named Lena, had taken their places on the bench and were just beginning their conversation when a middle-aged man dressed in business casual and reeking of self-importance sat down next to Theo. In fairness to the man, the seat *was* open. Theo had simply forgotten to put something there to indicate the space was already taken.

The man did not acknowledge the presence of Theo and Lena when he sat down. He was engaged in an animated telephone conversation of short statements and quick replies, all delivered with considerable volume and urgency. The man was arguing with Somebody about Something. For all intents and purposes, he took over the bench. When he wasn't speaking, he gestured emphatically with his free hand as he awaited his chance to berate the person on the other end of the call.

"What if it costs you a chance to become a partner? How many

people get to be a partner in a Big Four firm? Have you even thought about that? I raised you to be smarter than this. Hell, I spent a fortune on your college. And you're just going to throw it away?"

Theo turned to look at the man, hoping he might take a hint and either lower his voice or, even better, leave. The Talker was oblivious. Theo tried a loud clearing of the throat. That also failed to register. The Talker kept up his diatribe.

"Why are y'all in such a damn hurry? You're still young; it's not going to hurt anything to wait a couple more years, is it? This is a crazy time to do it. Think about what you'll be giving up. It's insane."

Theo didn't know if the argument being carried on beside him was almost over or just beginning. He did know, however, that if it continued for much longer, any bestowal to Lena would be nearly impossible. All sense of decorum, gravitas, or sweetness was lost as long as The Talker and The Phone were there.

Theo turned to Lena, whispered an apology, and asked her to excuse him for a moment.

He slid a few inches closer to the man until they looked like economy-class passengers on a regional commuter flight. Theo turned and winked at Lena, who was watching with spellbound curiosity.

The Talker continued his tirade. "Why can't you get this 'gotta-have-a-baby thing' out of your mind? You've got a career. What can't you understand about that? You have a kuh-reer!"

As he spoke, he leaned forward and stared at the ground between his feet. His right elbow rested on his right knee. His left hand held The Phone.

Theo's head was two feet or less from The Talker's when he began humming a song, not loudly but noticeably, with the aggravating monotony of a mosquito. Lena could hear it from where she sat. The man either did not hear it or was not bothered by it.

Undaunted by the failure of his initial attempt, Theo hummed a trifle louder and began to include an occasional line of lyric. He turned to smile at Lena, a conspiratorial smile as if to say, "Don't worry, my dear; we shall prevail, you and I."

Still no response from the man, who simply raised his voice to meet the challenge.

“Leave Gammy out of this. That was a different time, and she didn’t have one damn bit of business sense.”

At the mention of “Gammy,” Theo hesitated and examined The Talker’s face more closely. Then he leaned slightly forward and to his right, a move that placed him even closer to the offending device. He discontinued humming and began singing. His volume rose a decibel with every line.

Finally, with eyes full of irritation and contempt, The Talker turned and looked at Theo.

Theo nodded, kept singing, and upped the volume.

Lena feared for Theo’s safety but, at the same time, had to fight back laughter.

If a Portuguese man, woman, or child had walked by at that moment, they would have recognized that Theo was singing their national anthem. Such a person might have joined the elder countryman in that patriotic display. But no such pedestrian appeared, which left Theo with no alternative but to perform “A Portuguesa” by himself, loudly and proudly.

By then, passersby could easily hear Theo’s scratchy voice above the falling water of the fountain. One could only imagine what the person on the other end of the man’s phone must have been thinking.

The Talker left no doubt about what *he* was thinking.

“Hey, hold on just a minute. I’m sitting next to some old drunk guy.” He moved the phone away from his ear and turned toward Theo. “Hey, old guy, can’t you tell I’m trying to talk to somebody? Either tone it down, or I’ll call the law. Are you listening to me? What the hell language is that anyway? Would you please . . .”

Theo never broke stride. He had almost reached the end of the anthem — ”Saudai o sol que desponta/Sobre um ridente porvir” — when The Talker, exasperated, rose and stormed away from the bench.

Lena was finally able to unleash her laughter. It joined with Theo’s — a duet — as he slid back to the center of the bench. He removed his hat and placed it, along with the portrait, on the just-vacated seat.

“Well, well. I don’t think he was having a very good day. But Ms. Lena, where were we? You were telling me that you moved to Golden eight years ago. Tell me more.”

CHAPTER 40

Ellen, you might recall, had told Theo she would take him for a bicycle ride on the Riverwalk someday. He assured her that he knew how to ride a bike, had grown up riding one, and would be happy to be her guest whenever she was ready. He was not convinced she actually intended to make good on the promise, but after several mentions of it, she finally gave him a day and an hour.

"Tomorrow at seven. I know that's early, but if we wait till later, it'll be too hot. Jason is going to have a bike ready for you at his shop. We'll walk it down to the river and then ride. I don't want you to run over somebody on the sidewalk before we get down there. You know what Jason told me? He said he's got a special bicycle for old people like you. The tires are kind of fat, there's no gears, and the seat is plus size. That's what they call it. Plus size. Isn't that a hoot?"

She cackled with laughter.

Theo accepted the invitation. The summer days of late had been predictably hot and dry, but early mornings were tolerable and sometimes even pleasant.

Her instructions to Theo were minimal but clear. "Don't bring anything with you. I want you to be able to keep both hands on the handlebars and your eyes on the trail. The last thing I need is a casualty. I'll bring some water for us in my basket."

Theo was confident his old legs were up to a bike ride, and he looked forward to the prospect of seeing new stretches of the river, especially in the company of his eccentric acquaintance.

After accepting Ellen's invitation, he went straight to the RiverRides Bike Shop, introduced himself to Jason, the owner, and familiarized himself with the bicycle he would be riding the next day. Jason gave a quick orientation, helped him on and off it, let him ride in an open lot behind the shop, and assured Theo that all would be well.

"Ellen told me all about you, Mr. Theo. I've known her for a couple of years. She brings her bike to me when it needs work and I check her tires and put air in them every week. That thing is like a child to her.

I've never seen her ride with another person before, so you should take it as a compliment that she invited you. She doesn't trust many people."

"You are very kind to help her, Mr. Jason. I appreciate what *you* do for her."

The next morning, Theo put on his most casual pair of pants, his lightest and most comfortable shirt, his favorite walking shoes, and his flat cap (which he would turn backwards once their ride began). At six fifty-five, he crossed the Promenade and walked north to the bike shop. Ellen and the Noble Invention were waiting for him at the bench in front of the shop. She was wearing a blue T-shirt, untucked, a pair of pistachio-green pants, a red bandanna, a baseball cap, white socks, and white tennis shoes.

Already, the air was muggy, but the sun was low in the sky, and the temperature was comfortable.

"Good morning, Ellen," Theo said. "I could hardly sleep last night thinking about our ride."

"Well, don't be afraid! There's nothing to worry about."

"Oh, I'm not afraid. I'm excited about the adventure. You picked a perfect morning for a ride."

"Your bicycle is inside," Ellen said. "Here's a water bottle for you. Jason gave it to me. It has his company name on it, and he says it's good advertising, so if you're ever with people and you're drinking out of it, make sure you hold it so they can see his name, like this."

Ellen demonstrated, placing her fingers carefully around the bottle so as not to obscure the logo and printed text. To prove that he had been listening and was capable of product placement, Theo held his bottle with proper form and took a sip.

"Now, rule number one for the day. We need to hydrate. Jason taught me that. Especially on days like today. Drink a lot of water. You know what else he taught me? 'Motion is lotion.' Old people need to move around, so they don't get stiff. That's why this will be good for you. Motion is lotion for your joints. It's a good thing you walk a lot."

She removed something from the basket on her bicycle but held it out of Theo's view. "Now, Mr. Theo," she said, lowering her voice, "I need to say something to you, and I don't want you to be embarrassed or

upset. I think it might be a good idea to use this today. I asked Jason to put this on your bike. I'm just trying to be careful, so we don't get sued."

Ellen unfolded a small cardboard placard, homemade and hand lettered (all caps, black text on yellow background). It read, "STUDENT DRIVER."

Theo chuckled, a long chuckle that morphed into a full laugh.

Ellen had no idea why this was so funny to Theo, but she could not help but smile.

"Well, you are a student, aren't you?"

"I'm always a student, dear girl. And I suppose that makes you my professor. Professor Ellen, instructor in human propulsion."

Jason arrived with Theo's bike. They exchanged greetings, and Jason attached Ellen's sign to the seat post of the bicycle. She inspected his work.

"Jason, do you think we should put on some emergency flashers too?" she asked. "Those ones that flash on and off?" She opened and closed her hand like a sock puppet to illustrate her point. "You know, so people will notice the sign?"

"I think this'll do fine, Ellen. If it were night time, that would be a good idea, but I think you're safe without them this morning."

Theo and Ellen walked their bikes to the waterfront. When they arrived, only a single jogger was visible in the distance.

Before Ellen could give Theo final instructions about what to do, he straddled the bike, let out a laugh, then pushed off and began to pedal. "Here I go!"

He was wobbly at the launch, but with several slow, strenuous pumps, the drive chain bit into the sprockets, the tires became steady and upright, and Theo was on his way.

Ellen watched nervously until she was satisfied he knew what he was doing. She climbed on the Noble Invention and stood on the pedals until she caught up with him. They rode side by side just long enough for her to tell him their destination.

"We're just going to ride till we get somewhere."

She pulled ahead of Theo and stayed a comfortable distance in front of him, twenty-five yards, more or less, so that he would not have to

worry about a collision with her. She was able to watch him through a small mirror mounted on her handlebar.

In short order, Theo was a man at ease, enlivened by the wind in his face. If Ellen had been able to see the picture in his mind at that moment, she would have beheld a little boy on a simple child's bike, painted red with a basket on the front, pedaling vigorously through Pinhão, en route to the local baker for bread and cheese. The scent of crushed grapes is rich in his nostrils; his feet, ankles, and calves are stained slightly purple; and his elbows are spread wide, like bent wings, as he speeds by tile-fronted shops and houses under the Portuguese sky. At intersections, he glances downhill to the Douro, where boats are loading and unloading.

More than once, he waves in greeting to some familiar face.

But all Ellen could see was an old man, a very happy old man, whose face was radiant with sunlight and youthfulness. He was moving forward in space and backward in time. His lungs filled, and his heart beat with a vigor that belied his eighty-six years.

He entertained the idea of taking his hands off the handlebars and holding them above his head, as he had done when he was a boy, but he decided against it, fearing the lecture he would have to endure if Ellen caught him in the act.

When he picked up speed on a slight downhill slope, his silver hair blew from the sides of his cap like windblown pennants.

He laughed out loud. Ellen did too.

The Noble Invention was most important to Ellen because of its sheer usefulness. It transported her from one place to another efficiently and safely. Sometimes she rode in pursuit of a sense of peace ("motion is lotion" for the soul too), but she rarely rode for sheer pleasure in the way children do.

At that moment, however, that rare moment, she did. Seeing Theo behind her, entirely absorbed in his ride, inspired her to pedal harder, to lean forward, head almost even with her elbows, and to pursue speed for its own sake. The humid, warming air stung her eyes, pushed her hair back from her forehead, and hissed in her ears.

Theo's old soul and Ellen's weary soul were wide awake to the promise of the August morning.

They settled into an easy pace that allowed Theo to enjoy the river and its environs. Late-summer patches of goldenrod, aster, and ragweed were starting to bloom. Sourwoods were already turning scarlet, and other hardwoods showed signs of heat stress — withered branches, leaf loss, and seasonal fatigue.

At one stretch of the Riverwalk, Theo and Ellen rode under archways of branches and over a pavement made gold with early fallen poplar leaves.

At one bend, they surprised and put to flight a doe and fawn that had been grazing in the shade of an oak grove.

Ellen looked over her shoulder at Theo. "Hydration break!"

She stopped at a designated rest area on a low bluff that gave them a long view up and down the river. She and Theo parked their bikes, sat at a picnic table on the river side of the trail, and drank water in big gulps.

"Ellen, thank you for letting me join you. This was a splendid idea!"

"Did I go too fast?"

Theo waved off the very thought. "Not at all. My legs might be sore tomorrow, but for now, I feel fine."

He rubbed his thighs and calves and drank more water. He refilled his bottle from a nearby fountain and walked to the edge of the bluff. He feared that if he sat for too long, his legs might stiffen. Ellen joined him. They surveyed the long span of river.

"Ellen, do you ride here a lot?"

"Not so much now. I used to 'cause this is where I lived when I first came here. The Mission was too crowded. And I didn't know anybody under the bridge, and those people can be crazy anyway. So I came down here and lived by myself in a little tent I made."

Theo wanted to ask questions: What did you eat? Where did you sleep when it rained? What did you do all day? Obvious questions. Instead he listened, sensing that Ellen would reveal what she felt comfortable with.

"I came to Golden because I met another homeless person in Athens who told me about it. He told me about the coffee shop and the bookshop, and he told me people were nice down here, even at the Mission. So I hitchhiked and walked all the way from Athens to

Golden. And I like the name Golden. There's a Golden in Colorado, but that's too far to go, and it's real cold in the wintertime.

"When I got here, I liked it, so I stayed. You never know. William and I thought the people in Charleston would be nice, but look how that turned out. Did you read Saroyan yet?"

Theo assured Ellen he had indeed read selected writings of William Saroyan. Especially the bicycle stories.

She congratulated him and then posed an odd question. "Do you know where night comes from?"

Theo knew the textbook explanation, but instead of answering, he turned the question on Ellen. "You tell me. Where does night come from?"

"Tom came up with it. He says there are five billion trees in the world. Don't ask me who counted them. I don't know but probably somebody at *National Geographic*. Anyway, Tom says that under every single tree, there is some shade, like those trees over there."

Ellen pointed across the river. "Look at all that shade. And at the end of every day, the shade crawls out from under the five billion trees and gets above the trees, and that's what makes nighttime."

She chuckled. "I know that's not very scientific, but I like the way that little boy thinks. Tom."

"Ellen, remind me who Tom is."

"He's Douglas's brother. In *Dandelion Wine*. They ride all over Green Town on their bikes. And they think Leo Huffman invented the bicycle, so they ask him to invent a Happiness Machine too."

Theo nodded and grunted in acknowledgement. Ellen frowned at him.

"You *have* read Ray Bradbury, haven't you? If you haven't, you need to talk to Tony."

Theo made a mental note. Read *Dandelion Wine*.

"Mr. Theo, Tony told me you like to watch birds. Is that true?"

"It *is* true. Ever since I was a boy, I've enjoyed birds. I even keep a list of them. I have seen some beautiful varieties here in Golden. And you?"

"I don't keep a list, but I like them a lot. Even though they can be pretty cruel sometimes. And when Atticus says it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because all they do is sing, well, tell that to the bluebird mama who can't feed her babies because Miz Mockingbird the Hun keeps dive-bombing her. They act worse than people sometimes."

Theo was impressed once again by Ellen's literacy and power of observation.

Dive-bombing.

He had never thought of bird flight in that way before, but he had to admit the term was a precise description of what mockingbirds did. He would add that to his own thesaurus of bird flight: martins dance

(“they fly in cursive”), meadowlarks explode (“they rise like geysers”), and starlings sprint (as do those with a guilty conscience, “though no one pursues”).

“Mr. Theo, we are now going to begin our tour.”

Theo’s eyes widened at Ellen’s announcement. He was unaware that a tour was on the schedule.

“I wanted to do something nice for you since you gave me a portrait, but I can’t afford to buy you a present, so I have planned a special bird excursion.”

Theo thanked Ellen. He had no idea what such an excursion might entail.

“You’re welcome. Now, follow me. We’ve got to get closer to the river. I’ll lead the way. It’s not too hard to get there.”

They walked to the lip of the bluff and stepped carefully, just a short drop, over the edge. Their bicycles remained in view as they navigated their way through vines and underbrush — smilax, wild muscadine, blackberry, sensitive briar — in search of a destination known only to one of them.

“There it is.”

Ellen pointed to a piece of pink ribbon on a waist-high stem of lespedeza. It was just below a vertical bank of sandy clay, a bank covered with low grasses and running vines. Theo had heard that poisonous snakes thrived in such places and wondered if he might be in the neighborhood of one. Ellen was clearly unconcerned.

She stopped, knelt down, motioned Theo over, pulled a small flashlight out of her pocket, and pointed it at a barely-noticeable depression in the riverbank. “Look.”

Theo did as he was told, hands on knees, just as an angry kingfisher landed on a nearby branch and began to scold them noisily.

“Don’t worry about him, Mr. Theo. Look, right there.”

Theo peered into a three-foot-long burrow that had been dug into the dirt bank. He counted six small birds, a mixture of pink skin, new feathers, and long blackish bills.

“I have never seen a nest like this one before, Ellen. I’ve seen adult birds but never a nest. How did you find it?”

The adult bird continued its noisy protest.

“They nest around here every year. When I lived on the river, I would watch ‘em and try to find their nests. The closer you get, the more the mama and daddy get all agitated, and that’s when you know you’re close. Sometimes the tunnel is so long you can’t see the babies, but you can hear them peepin’.”

“Well, I will have to add this to my list. I had never seen the nest of the Megaceryle alcyon before now. Did you know that this bird used to be on the Canadian five-dollar bill? Not any longer though. The poor creature was replaced by an astronaut. A pity.”

They returned to their bikes and took generous gulps of water. It was only nine a.m., but the temperature was rising steadily.

“Mr. Theo, there are several more stops on the tour, but they’re all close by. And they’re all on the way back to town. I planned on doing the hard one first. I don’t want you to get sunstroke on me ‘cause if you do you’re pretty much on your own. I’d have to drag you behind the Noble Invention. Not a pretty sight. Are you OK?”

“I’m fine, Ellen. And I have just seen the nest of a belted kingfisher. What a wonderful gift you have given me.”

“I’m glad you like it. I found it just for you. Most people don’t have any interest in things like that. I’m happy to have at least one eccentric friend.”

She chuckled. Irony.

They mounted their bikes and retraced their earlier ride. Theo felt a bit of tightness in his legs but said nothing of it. It was a refreshing pain.

The tour continued. It included nests of a Carolina wren (in an abandoned paint can under a wax myrtle bush), blue grosbeak (in a patch of blackberry vines on the far side of the bike path), and a brown-headed nuthatch (in a hollow fencepost at the corner of an abandoned lot).

Theo had already, long before then, logged each of these in his birding list. Still, he was enthralled to observe the delicate nests up close.

The last nest they observed belonged to red-winged blackbirds. It was built in reeds at the edge of the river. Three chicks and one unhatched gray-speckled egg lay in a cup of dried leaves, mud, and straw.

The adult male showed up in a tantrum as Theo and Ellen leaned close to admire the fragile new arrivals, necks stretched and mouths open in expectation of food.

“I found this one yesterday,” Ellen said. “And I named the babies. One is Theo, one is Rio — that means river in Spanish, and it rhymes with your name — and this little one is named Ibis. Have you ever read ‘The Scarlet Ibis’? Don’t. It’s a short story, but it will ‘buh-rake’ your heart.”

“Ellen, the red-winged blackbird is very special to me.”

His mind returned briefly to the long-ago moment of passing splendor, when the murmuration of starlings and redwings over the River Marne — like fifty thousand feathered treble hooks — ascended, pivoted, and pirouetted until his soul had been pierced with the beauty of their intricate dance.

Someday he might share that memory with Ellen, but, presently, the mother bird had returned and joined the tirade against the unwelcome visitors. Theo and Ellen moved away slowly, got on the bikes, and returned to their starting point.

They dismounted, drank water, shared a peach that Ellen had brought, and walked to the street. Once there, they got back on their bikes and rode to Jason’s shop.

Tony saw them from the Verbivore as they pedaled along Broadway. He hollered something in their direction. Theo waved proudly, and the Penny Loafers applauded.

At the bike shop, Ellen gave Jason an enthused report about their morning excursion.

“I took him all the way to the bluff, and he didn’t even have to stop a single time.”

When Theo tried to pay for the rental, Jason waved it off. “Y’all are good advertising.”

“I showed him how to hold his bottle, and he’s already a pro,” Ellen reported.

They exited the building and were saying their goodbyes on the sidewalk when Ellen reached into her bicycle basket. She pulled out an object with a strip of pink ribbon around it.

It was a piece of wood, the size and shape of a soup can. Both ends

were flat and smooth. On one end, small holes — two or three dozen of them — had been drilled or punched into the wood. The bark of the tree, light gray, was still intact. Theo guessed it was maple or beech.

Ellen held it in both hands as if it were a trophy, one hand underneath and one encircling it, as she offered it to Theo. She clearly intended that Theo accept it as a gift.

“For me? Well, thank you, Ellen. It’s very kind of you.”

“Do you even know what it is? You might want to know what it is before you thank me.”

Theo looked at it studiously. Ellen spoke before he could make an incorrect guess.

“It’s called featherwood. I invented it. Here’s how you use it.”

Ellen reached into her basket once again and pulled out another item tied in ribbon. She held it up. “These are feathers I’ve found. I didn’t hurt any birds to get them. They were on the ground, and I just collected ‘em.”

She untied the ribbon. As Theo held the wood, she began to place individual feathers into each small hole. She did so with the carefulness of a florist arranging a bridal bouquet. The result was exquisite. Swatches of gray, brown, rose, red, blue, speckles, and white looked like a forest in miniature, a stand of conifers, broad at the bottoms, narrow at the tops, some tall and slender, others short and stubby.

No words were exchanged as Ellen focused on her task. More than once she rearranged the feathers to give what, in her mind, was better balance to the composition.

“Now, Mr. Theo, half of the holes are still empty. But if you start paying attention, you can find more feathers on the Promenade and in the Boughery, and you can put them here with the others. If you can’t figure out how to do it, I can do it for you.”

“What a beautiful invention, Ellen.” He meant it. “How did you make it?”

“It wasn’t easy, I promise you that, since I don’t have any tools. First, I find the piece of wood, about the right size, and then I have to sand it down. I rub it on the sidewalk till the ends are both smooth. And then I make the holes with an ice pick I borrow from the Mission. If I had a saw and a drill, I could do better.”

“You have done an excellent job as it is. It is lovely, my dear.”

Theo held it up for closer examination, studying the individual feathers. “This is an interesting one.”

Theo pointed to a six inch feather, deep blue with five short black bands on the narrow side of the shaft and an inch of white at the tip.

“That, Mr. Theo, is a rare blue jay feather. It’s a tail feather. I found it in the Boughery near Mr. Asher’s. I have *never* seen a blue jay in Golden. Not one. And I look for them. Somebody told me there used to be lots of them around here. Well, not now. But here’s what I know: if there’s a blue jay feather, there’s got to be a blue jay somewhere. That’s just simple logic. If P, then Q.

“You know what they say about blue jays? They say blue jays go to hell on Friday. Even Mr. Nobel Prize William Faulkner said it in one of his books. Maybe all the blue jays got trapped down there one Friday, except the one that lost this feather. Maybe the old devil grabbed at his tail when he was escaping and pulled this feather loose, and when the bird got to the Boughery, it finally fell out. That’s where I found it, down in the Boughery. Mr. Theo, that feather might belong to the last blue jay on Earth. You never know.”

Theo applauded Ellen’s colorful mind and fertile imagination. Such an enigma.

“It’s a beautiful feather, Ellen. What about this one? I’ve never seen one like this before. Do you know what kind of bird it comes from?”

The feather in question was emerald green, as if straight from swimming in a pool of crème de menthe.

Ellen’s eyes widened, and she chuckled guiltily. “Yes, it comes from a, from a, ummm … a hatbird. Don’t ask. I needed some color.”

A hatbird? Theo had never heard of that particular variety before. After a moment, however, his eyes also widened, and he grinned, with the realization that the hatbird probably lived on a hat *rack* in the hat *section* of the clothes pantry at the Mission.

The hatbirds of Golden were an endangered species as long as Ellen was in pursuit of exotic plumage.

Featherwood.

Theo made a mental note: *Ellen is an artist.*

They said their goodbyes and Theo made the short walk, gift in hand, back to Ponder House. He felt some tightness in his legs as he walked up the three flights of stairs, but he made the ascent with minimal groans.

The sun was mercilessly hot by then.

A meal, a book, and a nap seemed the perfect trifecta for the afternoon.

And so it was.

CHAPTER 41

It was another of those nights. A night of inexplicable sleeplessness. It was well after midnight, late September, when summer and early autumn competed for dominance. Cool, calm, quiet.

Theo got out of bed, opened the door, and stood on the landing overlooking the river. It called to him. He stepped back inside, dressed, put on a light coat, and set out for a stroll.

He kept a firm grip on the handrail as he stepped down the back stairs. The streets were dark, empty, and silent. He could hear the shuffle of his steps echo around him as he made his way to the river. ”Ghost town” was the phrase that came to Theo’s mind.

When he arrived at the Riverwalk, he stood at ease, hands clasped behind him. Faint light from both sides of the river shimmered on top of the Oxbow, as if a cache of diamonds was being floated to some distant destination.

The thought of water filled Theo’s mind. The incessance of its movement.

The hidden life beneath its surface.

The utter dependence of all living things on its presence.

The gentle beauty and surprising strength of its flow.

Its surrender to forces about and around it: gravity, temperature, ingratitude.

The deathlessness of it.

At some point, Theo’s mind rested, and he gave way, like a floating leaf, to the peacefulness of the current.

He turned to walk again, southward, looking down, deep in thought. The silence and sense of aloneness were total, which caused Theo nearly to stumble and fall when a figure approached him from the shadows.

The man was by himself, dressed darkly, hands hidden in the pockets of a jacket.

Theo froze. He had been warned about walking the streets alone late at night. The man was obviously coming straight at him. Theo’s heart pounded in his chest and he felt himself stagger. He avoided eye contact

with the approaching figure.

When the two were only four steps apart, the stranger spoke. There was an eerie distance to the voice, as if it was being piped in through a tunnel.

“Mr. Theo, is that you?”

It was Kendrick.

Theo looked up but had no breath for a reply.

“Mr. Theo, what in the world you doin’ down here this time of night?” The tone was that of a parent scolding a child.

Still no reply. Then, in broken phrases, and with a feeble laugh, Theo finally spoke. “I’m sorry, Kendrick. I’m afraid you startled me. My, my.” He took a breath. “Please just let me catch . . . I was startled.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Mr. Theo, but what are you doin’ here? This’s mighty late for you to be walkin’ ‘round alone.”

They took a few steps to the nearby bench where Kendrick had been sitting moments before, mulling over the events of his long day.

“I walk here sometimes when I can’t sleep,” Theo said, still shaken. “There’s never been anyone here before.”

“Well, *sometimes* there are people down here, and they not always the best people to run into by yourself. Some of the people who live under the bridge can be crazy in the dark.”

Theo’s breath was slow and labored as he regained his composure. “I suppose so.” He exhaled audibly. “But Kendrick, what are you doing here?”

“I’m on my break. I been cleaning that building over there,” he nodded toward the university offices, “and I came down here to think. I don’t come down here much, but I felt like being alone tonight.”

Theo sensed a heaviness in Kendrick’s voice. “And how is Lamisha today?”

“She’s awright. But we had a hard day today. That’s what I came down here to think about.”

Theo looked his way, as if to say, “Tell me more,” which Kendrick seemed eager to do.

“We had to go to court today, about the accident, the one where Lamisha got hurt. The State has charges on the little man who caused it, and the lawyers wanted us there since she was the victim. They want

to lock him up. Lamisha was so scared to go to the courtroom — I was too. She thought that man was gonna be like a monster or something. Me too. We never seen him before. The DA — his name is Mr. Derrick Prince or something like that — he wanted us to be there to tell the judge how we feel about it and how it messed up our lives. Lamisha's too little to say anything, but the lawyer wanted the judge to see how she walks now.

Theo nodded. "That dear child."

"So, Mr. Theo, when they brought that little man into the courtroom, he wasn't hardly a big as a kid. He's a man, older than me, but still just real small. He's been in jail all this time, and I could tell he was scared to death. Had him in handcuffs, and he can't talk in English 'cause he's from Guatemala, so they had to have a woman there who could speak for him and tell him everything we were saying. You could tell he was terrified."

Kendrick shook his head and looked at the pavement.

"And when the woman pointed to Lamisha and told him that that was the little girl he hurt, you know what he did? He started crying, I mean crying hard, and he put his hands together and held them up like he was saying a prayer to us, and he started trying to say something to me and Lamisha, real soft, but I don't know what he was saying 'cause the lawyer was talking to the judge, but I think he was telling me he was sorry. He didn't look like no monster, Mr. Theo. He was just a sad, little man and scared to death."

Theo shook his head. "That dear child."

"And then the judge and the lawyer did some legal talk and told the little man some things. I didn't understand it, and he didn't have no lawyer, so I don't think he understood it even though the lady tried to tell him. But then they asked him what happened, and he told 'em.

"He said he been living up in Fincher County for fourteen years. He's a bricklayer. He's an illegal, but he been working here all that time and never been in no trouble. Somehow he got caught for something, and they sent him back to Guatemala. But he didn't stay there. He came all the way back.

"And the lawyer told him, 'You know that's against the law, don't you?' And the little man told him, 'Yes, sir,' but he said he *had* to come

back. And the lawyer said, 'Why did you *have* to come back?', kind of with an attitude, like, 'Naw, you didn't *have* to come back. You could've stayed where you belonged.' And the little man said, 'Because of my little girl.'

"Mr. Theo, he's got a little girl, eight years old, just like Lamisha, and she lives in Fincher County. She was born there, and she's been stayin' there with her mama till her daddy could get back.

"Mr. Theo, sumpin's wrong with his little girl — she's real sick — and he said he had to come back, so he could work and help take care of her. He said they's no good cancer doctors in Guatemala. Then he said this, Mr. Theo; he said, 'I love my little girl, and I had to come back' . . .

"It took him three months, and when he crossed over in Texas, he borrowed a car from somebody, so he could drive home to his family. He drove at night, so he wouldn't get caught again. And he came through Houston and New Orleans and Mobile and Montgomery, and he was coming through Golden, almost back to Fincher County, and he was tired, and he fell asleep or got drowsy or something. And that's when he hit Lamisha.

"They had to take him to the hospital, but soon as he got well, they took him to jail. And he's been there ever since, just a couple miles from here. Mr. Theo, he still hasn't seen his little girl. Over a year, and still hasn't seen her yet."

Theo and Kendrick sat silently as the words sank in.

"So the judge and the DA gotta figure out what to do with him. And they asked me what did I think. Man, that ain't my job! But they're talking about locking him up for a felony, for ten years or something 'cause Lamisha's mama died in the crash. He didn't have no license, no insurance, and no legal papers. So, they trying to figure out what to do with him.

"Anyway, I'm supposed to go talk with the DA tomorrow, Mr. Derrick, and tell him what I think. He seems like an OK guy, and he's real sorry for what happened to Lamisha. I know the little man wasn't supposed to be here in Georgia and all that, but I swear, when I was sittin' there lookin' at him, and when he prayed his hands together and said somethin' to us, all I could see was one little man who loves *his*

baby girl lookin' at another little man who loves his baby girl.

"I know the judge and the DA gon' do what they gon' to do, but I just want to say the right thing tomorrow, so that's what I was sittin' here thinkin' about when you walked up. So, maybe the Lord put you here to help me figure this out, Mr. Theo. What you think I should tell 'em?"

Theo pondered before answering.

"Just tell him what you think is right, Kendrick. Be as kind as you can.

Do that."

Kendrick looked at his hands, clasped between his knees, and shook his head. "Mm, mm, mm. And Lamisha is worried sick about that little man too. And his little girl." He exhaled a long sigh. "Come on, Mr. Theo, I gotta get back to work. Let me walk you back up. I know this is a nice quiet place to think and stuff, but you don't need to be here by yourself again."

CHAPTER 42

The following morning when he left work, Kendrick walked to the district attorney's office two blocks away and waited for Derrick Prentiss, state's counsel, to arrive.

Throughout the night, Kendrick had thought about what he might say when the two of them finally met.

Two faces kept coming to his mind: one, the suffering young face of his daughter in the first weeks after the crash; and the other, the weary and frightened face of Mr. Mateo Mendez, the little man.

The decision as to what sentence might be imposed was not Kendrick's to make. As a victim, he could merely express an opinion and describe the impact of the crime on his life. The State of Georgia was the aggrieved party.

Grandmother Whitaker, who knew quite a lot about aggrievement, had been very succinct when he asked her what he should do.

"Baby, they's justice and they's mercy. If you not sure what to do and you gotta choose one or the other, I say always go the mercy way. If you make a mistake, make it for mercy. Bad mercy don't hurt nearly like bad justice, and always remember, the eye of God can see."

By the time Derrick arrived at his office, Kendrick had fallen asleep, sitting upright in the reception area.

"You're here mighty early, Mr. Whitaker. Can I get you a cup of coffee?" Kendrick was being covered up with "misters" these days.

"No, sir. I just got off work. I do night shift at the school. I'm on my way home."

"Well, don't let me keep you then."

They stepped down a hallway into the lawyer's office.

"Mr. Whitaker, I'm really sorry you're having to go through all this. I know it's been a tough year for you. Your daughter seems like a special little girl. I hate that she got hurt so badly. And, of course, it's tragic about her mother."

"I think Lamisha's doin' alright. She's a fighter, and we got a good doctor."

Derrick reached for a legal pad and a file folder. “Mr. Whitaker, we are looking at several options for sentencing Mr. Mendez. There are some state laws involved and some federal laws, too, since he’s illegal. We don’t really have any control over the federal part. But we’re very interested in what you have to say about the car wreck. Vehicular homicide is a state offense. It’s a serious charge.”

Kendrick listened carefully as Derrick explained the sentencing possibilities for the defendant. When it was his turn, he spoke in a calm, confident tone. He had already rehearsed this speech — several times in fact — while he had vacuumed floors during his work shift.

“Mr. Derrick, I been thinking a lot, a whole lot, about it. Really, since the day it happened, I been thinkin’. At first, I thought I wanted y’all to punish him really hard for what he did. I even felt that way yesterday morning till I finally saw him in court. Mr. Derrick, I don’t think that little man meant any harm. It was just a terrible, awful accident, and he’s already paid a high price, don’t you think? Even Scooby — that’s what I call my little girl — she’s all upset that Mr. Mendez can’t see his daughter.

“I know y’all prob’ly gon’ do something to him but, Mr. Derrick, I think he’s been through enough already. My little girl says the same thing. So, that’s how I feel about it. You can tell the judge and that lady. That’s how I feel about it.”

Derrick wrote a few words on the legal pad he was holding, asked some follow-up questions, and tried to explain immigration law to the extent he understood that tangled web himself. Kendrick asked a couple of questions and repeated his thoughts concerning the sentence.

“That’s very generous of you, Mr. Whitaker,” Derrick said, “especially after all that the defendant has cost you. I don’t know if I could ever see it that way.”

Kendrick lifted his head and looked directly into Derrick’s eyes. “You got a daughter?”

The question caught Derrick off guard. He stammered an answer. “No, my wife and I don’t have any children . . . yet.”

“Well, when you get a child, you’ll understand. If you was that little man, would you do what he did? Try to get back to your daughter so you could help her? I would. I’d crawl over glass. I think you would

too. So, I'm just trying to do unto others as I wish to be done by."

That archaic phrase — "do unto others as you wish to be done by" — was one Kendrick had heard frequently from his grandmother. He had not always practiced it as he should have, but something from recent months had brought its wisdom to light in his soul.

Derrick said, "Well, I don't know how the judge will feel about it, but I'll pass it on to him when we make a recommendation. And I'll be in touch with you when we set a sentencing date."

"Lawyer Derrick, can I ask you one more thing?"

"Sure."

"I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you don't remember me, do ya?"

Derrick looked closely at the young man across the desk. He frowned, then shook his head. "No, sir, Mr. Whitaker, I don't. Where would I know you from?"

"From the courthouse, about eighteen months ago. I think maybe you don't remember me 'cause you never looked at me. You didn't look at me a single time. You put me in jail eighteen months ago for something I didden do. My little girl was seven. I was in jail almost a year. When she nearly died, I was in jail."

Derrick shifted uncomfortably in his leather chair. "Mr. Whitaker, I'm sorry but I don't remember anything about that. I handle a whole lot of cases. Sometimes too many and too quickly. I admit, I don't really have time to look at everybody. What was your case about?"

"Oh, it don't really make any difference. My real crime was that I was too poor to hire my own lawyer. The lawyer the court appoints, he don't have time to look at nobody's faces either. I told him I hadn't done nothing wrong, and I could prove it. But he said if I was smart, I'd plead guilty to something and do a little time. So, that's what I did. I pleaded guilty, even though I didn't do one thing wrong. I know you hear people say that all the time, even when they're guilty, but sometimes it's true. I don't mean to be disrespectful, Mr. Derrick, and I know you deal with some mighty bad people, but it might do you good to look at some faces sometimes. There are some real people in those faces."

Derrick sat quietly.

“Mr. Derrick. Let me tell you what changed me yesterday. About that little man. Up till yesterday, all I had in my head was an idea about him. He was the ‘thing’ that hurt my little girl. And I didn’t mind what y’all did to that ‘thing.’ But what changed me was I looked at his face. Did you look? I mean really look? Not glance. Not a quick peek. I mean *look*?”

The young prosecutor did not answer. He was beginning to understand what it felt like to be cross-examined.

“Well, Mr. Derrick, I looked. Real good. Real hard. I looked at him. His eyes had tears in ‘em. And I saw hurt and fear, and it changed me. And when he leaves court tomorrow, I hope he’ll know somebody looked at him and didn’t see a thing or an idea or a label but a man with a soul. And a man with a child. Even if y’all put a hard sentence on him, I hope he’ll know somebody saw his face. The eye of God sees it. Sees you and me too.”

Kendrick looked down at his hands, worried that he might have overstepped his bounds.

“Mr. Derrick, I met this old man a few months ago. Named Mr.

Theo. He’s from Portugal. And he gave me a portrait that an artist had done of me. And I learned something from Mr. Theo. God gave us faces so we can see each other better. I used to not look at people’s faces so much. But I’m learning. Just like I’m looking at you right now. Mr. Derrick, eighteen months ago, I hated you. But I never one time looked at your face. But I’m looking now. Mr. Derrick, I believe you’re a good man. I think there’s a lot of goodness down in you.”

The two men sat quietly. Kendrick once again broke the silence. “Well, I guess that’s all I wanted to say. I need to get on home to my daughter. You need anything else from me?”

Derrick hesitated. “No, sir, I think that’s about all I need. But Mr. Whitaker, I apologize I didn’t look at you. I’m gonna think about that.”

Kendrick stood to leave. Derrick stood too and stepped from behind his desk. The two men shook hands. Kendrick looked into Derrick’s eyes. Derrick was looking firmly back at him.

They parted ways. *Mr*. Derrick and *Mr*. Whitaker.

Kendrick caught bus number 37 home and quickly fell asleep. It had been a long night.

CHAPTER 43

October arrived, and with it, a welcome drop in temperatures. Consistently cool days were still weeks away, but Theo had begun wearing sweaters on a regular basis.

The days shortened. Reduced hours of daylight were more than compensated for by the arrival of autumn color. The oaks of the Promenade and trees throughout the city put on an arboreal display that, while not quite New England, was striking, especially along the Oxbow at morning and evening.

By early November, "quitting time" and sunset were becoming almost simultaneous for most people who worked downtown, especially after clocks "fell back" for the American habit of daylight savings time.

Shorter days meant that evening bestowals were less and less practical. Additionally, tolerance levels among Goldenites for cool air and dampness seemed extremely low.

And so, Theo decided it was time to curtail the bestowals until warmer weather returned. He would resume when the azaleas bloomed.

By then, he had given portraits to forty-three people. It was a satisfying thought.

If a ledger of the world's gladness is maintained somewhere, he was confident it had been credited with a considerable deposit from all those meetings at the Fedder.

Forty-three handwritten letters.

At least forty-three hours of conversation.

Forty-three acquaintances and a handful of ongoing friendships.

There was no self-congratulation in his reminiscence; instead, only gratitude that he was allowed to be an instrument in the process.

He imagined forty-three homes that now displayed the artwork of Asher Glissen.

He did a quick mental inventory and recalled Leah the waitress (whose husband was in the Army overseas and whose daughter, a ten-year-old, played soccer), Taquon the sheriff's deputy (who arrived at

his bestowal in uniform), Hardy the old-school barber (who smelled of talcum powder and wondered if it would be vain to hang the portrait in his shop), and Miller P. the lawyer (who told Theo twice that he was sure he'd seen him somewhere before).

And, of course, Cleave Torber (whose desecration still brought a shudder to the old man).

One recipient, who had to be out of town, sent a proxy. Another, Lindsey, arrived with four children in tow.

One, who had only "a couple of minutes," never sat down. Then he stood and talked for an hour and a half.

There had only been three no-shows.

Theo retained their portraits, thinking that, perhaps, he would reach out to their owners again someday.

Or mail them.

With no return address.

Theo had maintained a record of all the bestowals, with notes about each recipient, in the same small journal where he listed the names of plants, trees, and birds that he was encountering for the first time in Golden.

At almost every meeting, in response to Theo's simple question — "Could you tell me a bit about yourself?" — recipients told story upon story. Colorful and mundane, tragic and euphoric, articulate and rambling; they ran the gamut.

All forty-three recipients had been told they were capable of saintliness. All had been given a description of what Theo "saw" when he studied their faces in the frame. Almost all were, or seemed to be, grateful for his generosity and equally grateful that someone wanted to hear *their* story. Many, maybe most, even after his explanation, were befuddled by his kindness to them.

In hindsight, it seemed miraculous to Theo that so many showed up at the Fedder.

If not for the season and the weather, he would gladly have carried on. But now, at least for a while, it was time for a rest.

CHAPTER 44

Golden County Government Center
November term of Superior Court

The building, home to numerous local government offices, was abuzz with activity that morning. On judicial floors nine through thirteen, the broken pieces of failed marriages; the sordid consequences of bad choices; the pursuit of financial damages for injuries, real or fictional; and the undeniable consequences of poverty and ignorance filled the various courts with a sea of humanity.

The elevator to the courtroom of Judge Kenneth McLender was already crowded when Theo stepped on board. It made stops on every floor.

Theo got off at number nine and entered the courtroom. He spotted Kendrick in one of the front rows and took a seat beside him. A tense energy filled the air as victims of crime, family members, defendants, and lawyers waited in various states of nervousness for the day's proceedings to begin.

Promptly at nine o'clock, Judge McLender entered the courtroom and, after making general announcements, began working through his docket. All matters that day concerned criminal offenses. It was a "hearing day," meaning no trials would take place. The court was in session simply to rule on pre-trial motions, set bail, accept guilty pleas, and deal with probation violations.

Dark suits and briefcases, incomprehensible jargon, strong emotions, disappointment, and confusion were all on display as the judge made rulings and signed orders.

Theo was fascinated, and mildly horrified, at the casualness with which lives were shaped and altered by the pronouncements of an ordinary man wearing a robe.

Eventually, after two hours, the clerk called the case of "State v. Mateo Mendez."

Mr. Mendez, the little man from Guatemala, was brought into the

courtroom under the watchful eye of an armed officer. He was shackled, hands and feet, and wore an orange-and-white-striped jumpsuit that was standard attire for residents of the Golden Jail. He was clean shaven, and his hair was combed.

As he was led by a deputy from the jury box to the defendant's table, an impeccably dressed lawyer stepped forward. A good lawyer. A tenacious lawyer known for getting good results. An expensive lawyer. Mr. Mendez did not know yet why the man had shown up at jail for a consultation with him a week earlier. Nor did he know who had hired him. He could only be thankful.

The little man still looked nervous and afraid before the bench. But he was no longer alone. He had the protection of an advocate.

***Gracias, Padre*.**

Derrick Prentiss was seated at the prosecutor's table. He had handled all cases for the State that morning.

Judge McLender addressed the attorneys. "I understand you have an agreement concerning the charge of vehicular homicide?"

Derrick nodded. "We have, Your Honor."

He stated the terms of the agreement — the plea bargain — that had been reached. He turned and looked for several intentional seconds into the face of the accused.

It had been agreed that Mr. Mendez would plead guilty to vehicular homicide, a felony. His lawyer had tried valiantly to have the charge reduced to a misdemeanor. But the words "illegal immigrant kills American mother and cripples little girl" had too much political toxicity to make such an arrangement possible. The judge and the DA, after all, had to seek election every four years.

Mr. Mendez would enter a guilty plea and be sentenced to a jail term equal to the time he had already served.

Judge McLender, after some formalities, accepted the plea, signed an order, and called for a ten-minute recess.

Derrick found Kendrick and Theo and explained what had just taken place.

"So, I just want to be clear," Kendrick said. "What you mean is, he's done his time? They're gonna let him out? Today."

"That's right. He's done his time."

Mr. Mendez would be processed out of the Golden Jail that very afternoon. The future, however, would remain uncertain for the little man. His lawyer had applied for and was trying to obtain a "hardship visa," which would allow him to stay in Georgia and care for his daughter. The lawyer had little confidence it would be granted.

Mr. Mendez was now afloat in the legal whirlpool of immigration law. But some things *were* certain.

He would be released from jail.

He would be allowed to put on the new khaki pants and white shirt his lawyer had bought and delivered to the court deputies.

Within hours, he would see his wife and daughter. They had stayed the previous night at a nice hotel near the river. The room had been paid for, compliments of Mrs. Gidley. On her own initiative, and with considerable effort, she had located Mr. Mendez's wife and daughter in Fincher County to inform them of the hearing.

Lamisha would sleep that night knowing that her letter to Mr. Mendez's daughter, Maria, had been delivered and that the little man and his family would be together.

As he walked away from the defense table, Mr. Mendez's eyes scanned the large courtroom until he found Kendrick. They locked eyes. The little man stopped briefly, bowed his head, and held up his unchained hands in prayer.

CHAPTER 45

Eleventh month. Eleventh day. Eleventh hour. Armistice.

The hour the First World War went silent.

It was also the date and time, twenty-nine years later, that Tony the bookseller was born.

Theo, having somehow learned that fact, handwrote and personally delivered an invitation to his gregarious friend. It read:

Next week, your birthday, six p.m., please join me at Ponder House, third floor, for celebration of a good man's life.

Tony promptly accepted, though he questioned the goodness of the life being celebrated.

On the agreed-upon day, he closed the Verbivore early, changed clothes in the shop's backroom, and made the short walk to Theo's. It was dark out and cold.

Tony climbed the three flights of stairs, looked briefly at the river from the high perch of the landing, knocked on the door, and then stepped into the warm sanctuary of Theo's home. Like the few others who had ever been inside the apartment, Tony was eager to tour the interior of a space he had only seen from ground level. At first glance, he was struck by its charm and by the stark contrast it offered to the clutter of the Verbivore.

"Theo, it looks like Sicily gives you a pretty good housing allowance. This is gorgeous, my friend. If you ever need an interior decorator to help you upgrade it a bit, I'm for hire. This is really nice."

His banter did not belie his admiration of the place. Theo took Tony's coat.

A young woman stepped out of the kitchen into the hallway.

Her hair, shoulder length and ink black, was pulled behind her ears, carefully but casually. Several strands escaped her gold hairclip and fell prettily across her temples. A crisp white blouse and black silk pants covered her lean, sculpted figure. The unblemished, olive skin of her face and neck, the full lips and duchess nose, and the dark amber eyes

that sparkled with lamplight were, to Tony, a feast before a feast. He was discreet in the way he looked at her, but he did not miss a detail of her beauty.

He tried not to act surprised and almost said something to Theo about the perks of belonging to the Mafia. Instead, he gently shook the young woman's hand, bowed slightly as Theo would have done, raised his eyebrows, and kept his silence. That she was almost young enough to be his granddaughter did not mitigate one bit his pleasure in watching her return to the kitchen.

Theo and Tony walked down the hallway to the front room, where an elegantly set table awaited them. En route, Tony nudged Theo, smiled dopily, nodded back over his shoulder toward the kitchen, then winked and held a thumb up, the gestural equivalent of "you old devil, you."

Theo could not help but chuckle.

"Tony, I was going to cook for us tonight but, instead, I had Chef Bouchard prepare a special meal for this special occasion. He has made Portuguese dishes and added his own magic touch. Do you know Chef Bouchard?"

"I don't know him, but I've heard of him. He owns that fancy restaurant, doesn't he? The Canto? On my poor, pitiful wages, I'm afraid I'll never be able to eat there."

Theo patted Tony's shoulder. "Well, then, I'm even more happy to introduce you to his work. He is an artist, a maestro."

In the months Theo had been in Golden, he typically ate small meals that he either prepared himself or purchased from eateries around Broadway. He was mindful of his slowing metabolism and watchful of what and how much he ate. With one exception.

The Canto.

As a reward for discovering such a singular culinary paradise, Theo permitted himself one meal each week at the Canto for as long as he was in Golden. He would arrive at five o'clock and sit at a corner table with a book, a glass of wine, and a meal fit for royalty. He and Chef Bouchard became acquainted, spoke frequently, often in French, and always with mutual admiration. The chef appreciated Theo's discriminating palate almost as much as Theo enjoyed the chef's cuisine.

By early autumn, Theo had achieved the enviable goal of eating every item on the menu, a feat that prompted Chef Bouchard to begin creating one-of-a-kind meals exclusively for the distinguished old gentleman.

“No wonder I walk so much,” Theo said. “Your meals threaten to kill me first and then make me want to stay alive so I can return the next week for more!”

It was icing on the cake that a number of Asher’s large paintings were on display throughout the restaurant.

And so, when Theo asked Chef Bouchard to prepare a special meal for Tony’s birthday and send it to Ponder House, an agreement was quickly struck.

“Chef, I’m very pleased to come to the restaurant, but sometimes in crowded places, I find it difficult to hear well. For this one occasion, it would be very nice to dine at home.”

“It is my pleasure, Mr. Theo. And my honor.”

On Armistice Day, late afternoon, Chef Bouchard himself arrived at Theo’s apartment with dishes and pans full of delicacies. The aroma alone was worth the price of the meal.

With him was a young woman from Barcelona, Mia, who had recently begun working as a hostess and server at the Canto. Her face was vaguely familiar to Theo, but he could not recall where he might have met her. He had met so many people by then!

Once the dishes were brought up the three flights of stairs and laid out in Theo’s kitchen, Chef Bouchard instructed Mia and Theo about heating, preparing, and plating the food to assure that the meal would meet the demanding standards that governed all things Canto.

“Now, Theo, I must get back to the restaurant. Mia will stay here until the meal is served. If you have questions about anything, you can call me.”

Theo bowed to the chef.

For the next half hour, the old man and the young woman put finishing touches on the meal and the dining room. Mia remained in the kitchen while Theo tended to the table setting.

Minutes before Tony was to arrive, they worked together in the kitchen, removing dishes from the oven and garnishing the food as

Chef Bouchard had instructed. As they did, they spoke a mixture of Spanish and Catalan in a conversation that was mostly Theo's questions and Mia's short answers.

Theo learned that Mia had been in Golden for a year on a worker's visa, doing an internship with a marketing firm. She had recently begun working evenings at the Canto "to meet new people and get away from the house."

Her voice had an alluring softness about it, a quality that, to Theo, was a welcome departure from the loudness that typified so much American talking. Her tone was not attributable to timidity or bashfulness. It was simply a choice of volume that complemented the sensuousness of her beauty. Perhaps someone as pretty as her did not have to speak loudly to get the attention of others.

And yet, beneath her poise and pleasantness, Theo detected a nervousness in the young woman. He wondered what her story was. And how, he wondered, did he know her? Had he seen her at the Canto?

"Mia, have we met before?" he asked finally. "I have a feeling that I know you from somewhere, but I cannot recall where."

She put down the dish she was holding and faced him, obviously intending to answer his question.

There were three loud knocks on the door. It was six o'clock.

Tony had arrived.

When Tony and Theo had taken their seats, Mia brought serving dishes, placed them at predetermined spots on the table, poured wine in the glasses, and explained the menu. It was an artful blend of dishes, American and Portuguese. Her accent was one more exotic touch to a meal full of exoticism.

When Mia finished her presentation, she made sure everything was in order, wished Theo and Tony "a bon appétit," and quietly left the apartment.

"Now, Theo, she is what you call an appetizer. She could have spent ten more minutes telling us about the food, and I'd have been just fine with that. Well done, old boy . . . Heavenly."

Theo and Tony began the feast.

Between grunts of praise, fragments of attempted conversation, and a

hailstorm of compliments — from Tony to Theo for his hospitality, from Theo to Tony for his recognition of epicurean excellence, from both to the chef for his artistry — the meal received the highest tributes payable to good food . . . unhurried enjoyment and utter disappearance.

Theo excused himself from the table and went to the kitchen. He returned with a small cheesecake, a single candle glowing from the center.

He sang "Happy Birthday" heartily in Portuguese.

They moved from the dining area to the plush armchairs beside Theo's reading lamp. On a small table between the chairs sat a bottle and two small glasses.

"And now, Tony, your birthday gift. One more touch of Portugal. A very special piece."

Theo reached for the bottle with both hands and held it as if it were delicate as a hummingbird.

"Tony, before we open the bottle, I must tell you a bit about port wine. Not to insult your sophistication, my good fellow, but just so you will know what you are tasting. Will you allow me?"

"Whiskey, I know. Beer, I know. Wine, a bit. But Theo, I'm totally ignorant when it comes to port. I do know it's a favorite of the Godfather, but other than that, I know nothing. So talk. I am your student."

"And a good student you are sure to be. Tony, this," Theo lifted the dark bottle as if it were an infant at baptism, "this bottle comes from grapes on a hillside above my home, at Quinta das Carvalhas near Pinhão.

"The vineyard is owned by the same family now that my father worked for when I was a boy. Did you know that all the port wine in the world comes from the hills of the Douro River Valley? One hundred miles, twenty-five thousand farmers, one hundred thousand acres of vines.

"Port wine was invented by the British, and the port companies are now owned mostly by the Spanish. But only the Douro River Valley of Portugal can make the grapes.

"Since the eighteenth century, the hillsides have been terraced by the

poor hardworking people of the villages along the river. Here is the interesting thing. There is very little soil on the hillsides, only rock. Rock like slate.

“Long before bulldozers and big machines came along, men had to work with hand tools and dynamite to make the land ready for the grapevines. That is why they are called ‘the vineyards of Hercules.’ Some of the vintners say, ‘We get no help from God.’ Tsk, tsk, tsk. It is hard, hard work.

“Well, the farmers plant the small plants, and then the small plants have to grow deep, deep down to reach the water in the ground. For four meters and more, the taproots go down and down, weaving between the slate to find water. If all goes well, the vines grow, and when the summer is over, there is a beautiful crop. Then everyone along the river — men, women, children — begins the slow, steady work of harvest, the colheita.

“My father was a manager at Quinta das Carvalhas for many years. He loved the river, the valley, and the vine, and he took great pride in caring for the place. When I was a little fellow, my father let me work, *made* me work, to learn the life of the vineyard. At harvest time, we would take the secateurs — you know, the scissors — and all day, clip, clip, clip. Cut, cut, cut the grapes. So beautiful, Tony, I tell you, the fruit was so beautiful. Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca.

“So, we cut the grapes and put them in the baskets. The men, like mules, carried them on the shoulder to wagons. Sixty kilos, they weighed. Day after day till all the fruit was gathered.”

Theo hesitated. “I’m telling you more than you wish to know?”

Tony shook his head. “No, no. I’m very interested, but I have to confess, I would never have taken you for a farm worker.”

Theo grinned. “Ah, but everyone in Pinhão was a farm worker, at least part of the year. Pinhão was just a village; it still is today. Like much of Portugal, it was a poor place. We had a president who treated us harshly, and we all suffered. But always our land, our climate, and the will of the people survive.

“Once we had gathered our grapes from the vines, they were taken from the hillside to large stone tanks called lagares, thirty feet square and four feet high. Things have changed, but, when I was a boy and a young man, we would march on the grapes with our bare feet. We would line up, fourteen men shoulder to shoulder like a chorus line, and march, up and down and back and forth, for hours at a time, all day, until the juice was out of the skin.

“The feet are perfect for the work, Tony. Machines can be too rough, too heavy on the seeds. They make for bitter wine. But feet are just right. It was serious work, important work, hard work, but also much fun. Always, we had accordion music to lighten the mood and break the monotony. We believed that a happy room makes good wine.”

Tony had leaned back in his chair, legs crossed, left cheek propped on his hand, attentive, nodding from time to time to affirm his interest in Theo’s narrative.

“The juice would ferment for three days and then be mixed with brandy and put into barrels. And then, after six months or so, the barrels would be loaded onto wooden boats called barcos rabelos and taken to the town of Vila Nova de Gaia, on the riverbank across from Porto. It was a dangerous adventure. Three men on a boat with sixty barrels. Three days and nights it took to transport the port to Gaia. Even today, all the port in the world is stored and bottled in the port cellars of Gaia. For ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, the port ages, some ruby, some white, some tawny. All those years in deep sleep, but the port is changing like a chrysalis, letting God take His time to do what only He can do. Water to wine, but slowly. It is all so remarkable.”

Theo took a long breath. “Tony, you are a good student. Now you know something, a wee bit, about port wine. And there is a reason I explain all this to you.” Theo held up the bottle ceremoniously. “Let me now tell you about *this very bottle* and why I chose it for us. There are different categories of port: ruby, white, tawny. These are all blends of

many grapes from different vines. But in certain years, grapes of a particular vineyard and particular vines are deemed to be of exceptional quality. We call these 'vintage.' They are not blended with anything else. They stand alone.

"Vintage is God's work. A grower cannot make it happen, and no one knows when a crop will be of such rare excellence. If a grower thinks he has a vintage crop, he sends a sample of his fruit to be evaluated and certified. If approved, voilà, vintage. If not, maybe next year. There is no finer drink than vintage port.

"Well, Tony, we are fortunate, you and I. I have friends and family still in the Douro Valley and friends at the port cellars in Gaia. Sometimes I ask them to send an old bottle of the very best port. If there is something important I wish to celebrate, I request a bottle. They are a trophy."

Theo held the bottle out to Tony. "Look here." Theo pointed to the label. "This bottle is vintage 1947, yes, 1947, the year you were born. Tony, I should tell you, we Portuguese save the good port only for very special occasions. Well, meeting you has been a special occasion for me. Your goodness to Ellen, your goodness to me, your love for books, all these deserve the praise of man, and so . . . "

Tony, rarely at a loss for words, fumbled for something to say, but nothing surfaced, not even a thank you.

"So, Tony, I remind you, the roots can only grow in stony, difficult ground. The pruner's shears cut deep. The grapes are crushed and kept in the dark for decades. For the sake of the sweetness. For this very moment."

Tony had no time to process the long metaphor before Theo, brimming with excitement, pointed again to the bottle's label, to a very small line of print that identified the particular vineyard from which the vintage had originated.

"Tony, listen carefully to me. I worked *that* vineyard in 1947, that very vineyard. I was fifteen years old but strong enough to be of some help. It might well be that these hands," Theo held out his open palms, "these very hands cut the grapes whose juice is in this very bottle. It is possible that these feet, when they were much younger, of course, danced on those grapes in the winepress.

“Know this: When you drink this port, you taste the hillside of my childhood. You taste the sunlight and the Douro. You taste the strength of the vine, the sweetness of the fruit, the sweat and labor of the harvesters, the oak in the barrels. You taste the music of the accordion, the laughter of the children, and the prayer of the priest. You taste a young man’s joy and an old man’s memory.

“Now, Tony, last thing, and then we drink. Vintage port, unlike the others, will not last in a decanter. You have only two days to drink what is in the bottle before it goes bad.”

Tony laughed. “Well, then, let’s get to work, Professor.”

Theo poured the deep red liquid into delicate glasses. He inhaled the bouquet of the drink, sighed contentedly, and raised his glass. “I present to you, 1947, Vintage Tony.”

They took sips and allowed the complex richness of the port to rest on their tongues.

“Is it not divine, Antony? Have you had a drink so beautiful?”

Tony replied with a question of his own.

“Theo, would you mind if I tell you another story from the war? It’s about some wine I had while I was over there. I’ve never told anyone about it. Don’t worry; I’ll try not to fall apart like I did the last time.”

Theo nodded. “I would be honored.” Quietly, though, he feared a return to the jungle.

“I had this really good friend in Vietnam. Robert Akroyd. We all called him Bobbo. Everybody in Nam was either a nickname or a last name.

“He was from New Jersey. Strong as an ox, smart as anything. And the nicest guy you’d ever meet. He read lots of serious books about deep stuff, but he loved cowboy stories, too, especially Louis L’Amour.”

Tony chuckled. “I never understood how somebody in New Jersey could even find Louis L’Amour books, much less like ‘em. But he did. I’ve got a whole shelf of them in the shop, and whenever I see ‘em, I think of Bobbo.

“He and I went through Basic together, deployed together, stayed together while we were over there. Kind of hard to explain, but we became really good friends, almost like brothers. Here I am, this turnip seed from the South, and he’s an Einstein from New Jersey with a Yankee accent, but somehow we clicked.

“He didn’t do much talking like the rest of us did, but he had this great laugh, and his voice was kind of soft. He’d do anything to help you.

“We saw some awful things. Did some awful things and survived some really close calls.

“You remember that other story I told you about Ben Suc?”

Theo nodded. How could he possibly forget it?

“Well, Bobbo was with me that day when it happened. He was one of the guys who warned me about the little boy running toward me. I think he felt some responsibility for what happened. So, we both carried that guilt together.” Tony paused. “But here’s what I noticed about Bobbo. Whenever we were fighting the VC, we were all beasts. All of us. Even him. We had to be. But even when we *weren’t* fighting, most of us still acted like beasts. The way we talked, the way we bragged and played tough and lied and thought about people; it was horrible. I know it was a way to cope, but still, the war brought out the

worst in all of us.

“But not Bobbo. He was hell on wheels when the battles were going on, but when they were over, he was quiet and calm. And it wasn’t weed or whiskey. That’s just the way he was. He was different from the rest of us.

“He was planning to finish college after the war and study to be a high school coach and history teacher, maybe a principal. He could have been anything, a doctor, a lawyer, anything, but that’s what he wanted to do.

“We were there in 1968, when Tet happened. We were in Khe Sanh.”

Theo glanced at Tony for signs of where this story might be taking him. He saw no cause for concern. There were no dragons in the glass.

“One night, we were out in the field after a long, horrible day. We’d engaged the enemy that afternoon and lost a lot of guys.

“Me and Bobbo were in a foxhole. Hot as hell but at least it was dry.

There was lots of noise around us even though the fighting wasn’t too close. But it was hard to sleep.

“So, Bobbo’s real religious. We talked some about it but not much. He knew I wasn’t interested in that stuff. But he always had this little New Testament with him, a real little one in his back pocket, and the Psalms were in it. After a few weeks in the jungle, it was a mess. It had dirt and mud and grease all over it. It looked like it’d been through the valley of the shadow of death, just like the rest of us.

“Anyway, when we were in the hole that night, things sort of calmed down, and Bobbo pulled out his New Testament and started reading. I asked him what he was reading, and we started talking about it. He told me what he believed. And Theo, you’ll love this. He said he believed in heaven, the real place, and in Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead. And like an idiot, I did my disrespectful smartass routine and told him all that stuff sounded crazy to me.

“And then you know what he said? Get this. He agreed with me. He said it sounded crazy to him too, but he still believed it. He didn’t get mad at me.

“But this is the part I really wanted to tell you. He opened his mess kit and had this little bottle — it was made out of blue glass, like a pill bottle or something. He’d filled it with wine back at base before we went out to the jungle. And he had a little piece of white bread too. And he was going to take Communion out of it, right there in the hole. All by himself. I didn’t even know that was permitted, to take Communion all by yourself in a foxhole. I thought you had to be in a church with a preacher or somebody like that.

“But there’s Bobbo in a damn foxhole, in the middle of a war, getting ready to do the Lord’s Supper. And then, get this, Theo.”

Tony swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. “Get this. Bobbo asked me if I wanted to join him. And he told me a little bit about it, about forgiveness and faith and all that, and I said yes. So, I had my first Communion, and my last, right there. I didn’t really know what I was doing, and I hoped it didn’t get him in trouble with God, but I’ll never forget it. ‘The blood of Christ, shed for you.’ That’s what he said.”

A moment of silence descended. Tony took a deep breath.

“A week later, we were on a patrol and Bobbo was about ten yards in front of me. We got ambushed, and all hell broke loose. He got hit real bad. Real bad. But he was still conscious. I stayed right beside him in the middle of the fighting till the medic got there.

“He couldn’t talk — he was in shock ‘cause he was losing so much blood — but he kept looking right at me, right into my eyes. And when we put him on the stretcher to be airlifted out, he reached up to me. His hand was shaking real bad, but he reached up and gave me his little book.

“That was the last time I ever saw him. He died the next day. I guess y’all would say he went to heaven. I hope so. God, I want to believe that. It just felt like the end of Bobbo to me.”

A long silence followed. Then Theo finally spoke. “In one sense, yes, it *was* an end. A terrible end. But maybe not *the* end. Maybe an end with a future.”

Tony mulled over the curious phrase, “end with a future.” After a few seconds, he straightened up in his chair and held his small goblet of port shoulder high. “So, Theo, *this* glass of vintage is probably the finest wine I’ll ever drink. But that little pill bottle was pretty special

too.”

Theo raised his glass. “To Bobbo and his book.”

Tony lifted his arm and nodded. “To Bobbo . . . and his book.”

CHAPTER 46

The following morning, Tony was positively ebullient. One year older and two decades younger. A veritable *bon vivant*.

"Theo, good morning! What a birthday you gave me, my friend. Never had a better one in my life. The meal was divine, the port was unbelievable, and Mia . . . Oh, Mia, Mia, Mia. Unforgettable."

"Tony, you have impeccable taste for such a young man. She is indeed a beautiful woman."

Tony squared himself in front of Theo. "OK, Theo, take the witness stand. You gotta set the record straight. I know you're an old bachelor, been one a long time and all that, but surely an old romantic like you has had some flings with the ladies. Tell me it ain't so."

It was part statement, part question. Theo chuckled.

“Maybe some flings once upon a time. But only one great love.”

“Your wife?”

Theo looked at the ground and shook his head. ”No, unfortunately not. The marriage . . . oh, I’m still not certain what I was thinking. In some ways, that was a big mistake. No, the one great love wasn’t for long, but the woman took my heart in her hand. Maybe a man gets only one of those in his life. Even if it breaks his heart. And you?”

Tony did not take the bait. “No, no, no, no. No dodging this time. We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you. Tell me about her. The one great love of Theo the Mysterious. Tell me.”

Theo waved it off. “Really, Tony, there’s nothing to tell. I loved a girl. She left me. We went our separate ways. The end. And it was so long ago, and for so short a time, less than even a year. My memory is not to be trusted. You? What about the one great love of Tony the Verbivore?”

Tony guffawed. “Ha! Not a pretty picture, Theo. Just a bunch of flings and failures. Unfortunately, most of my lady friends were female versions of myself. I never had one great love. I think that door closed for me a long time ago. But still, I like to look at ‘em. Right? I love ‘em all.”

Theo held up a forefinger and touched it to his lips. His eyes narrowed and turned skyward, the look of a man trying to remember something. “So . . . Tony? I read something years ago that I still think about. ‘A man who loves all women loves no woman. A man who loves only one woman loves all women.’ Do you agree?”

Tony took a drag on his cigarette. “Theo, where in the hell do you come up with this stuff?”

“Tony, my boy, remember. I, too, am a verbivore. A man who takes long walks by the river and reads books always has something to think about.”

“Right-o. Say the saying one more time, and let me think about it.”

Theo did so with air quotes around the first “love.” Tony wrote it down, thinking he might discuss it with the Penny Loafers later that day. Perhaps, too, the Loafers would assist him in finishing off an excellent bottle of port.

Vintage Tony.

Days later, Mr. Ponder received a letter directed to “Mr. Theo, c/o Ponder House.” There was no return address. The postmark was from Golden. He called Theo. “Would you like me to open it and find out what it’s about?”

“No. I’ll come get it on my way to the Chalice.”

A short while later, Theo sat in the coffee shop and read the letter. It was typed on plain white paper.

In Spanish.

Dear Mr. Theo,

This is Mia from the Canto. I served the meal at your apartment recently. The birthday meal for your friend, Mr. Tony.

You asked me if we had ever met before. We had not.

When Chef Bouchard asked me to be the server at your home, he only told me that you were a very nice man and one of his favorite customers. I had never seen you at the Canto before because I do not work there until seven o’clock, after my other job.

On the way to your apartment, Chef Bouchard told me your name. When he said it, I realized I knew you.

Several months ago, you wrote me a letter. You wanted to give me a portrait from the coffee shop.

I have always been known by my middle name, Clarise. That is the name you used when you wrote to me.

At that time, I had a boyfriend named Cleave. He found your letter and read it without my permission. He told me I could not meet you at the fountain. He threatened me. I was afraid of him, for good reason.

I wanted to call or write to you to warn you, but I had no way to locate you. I was afraid to call the police because of what my boyfriend might do. He is very jealous and has a dangerous temper.

I am sorry I put you in a bad situation. I do not know what happened at the fountain, but I can imagine. My boyfriend simply told me he had fixed the problem. I was worried about you.

Shortly after that day, I left him. I was afraid of him finding me and hurting me again. I changed all my numbers, and I now use my first name, Mia. I am still afraid of him but less so now that he has a new girlfriend.

At your home last week, as we were making the table ready, you asked me to find some cloth napkins. I did not know which drawer they were in, but when I was looking I found my portrait.

I wanted, right then, to tell you my story and give you my apology, but I did not want to intrude on your special occasion.

I do apologize that your kindness was met with such unkindness. I am glad you did not get hurt.

I have a request to make. Will you please destroy the portrait? That Clarise is no longer in Golden.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Mia

That evening, at home, Theo granted Mia's wish. He also wrote a letter to her, stating *his* apology. He left it with Chef Bouchard the next time he went to the Canto. He never saw Mia again while he was in Golden.

Tony, however, mentioned her often.

CHAPTER 47

"Well, good morning, sir. I had a hunch you'd be here about now."

Asher had guessed he might find Theo at the Chalice. The old man, who had already taken a stroll beside the river, looked up from his newspaper. Asher handed him an envelope. "It's an invitation, Theo. I could simply ask you, of course, but Brooke likes me to paint these nice one-of-a-kind invitations to make it more special."

Theo nodded his approval. "I like her style. A keepable invitation. Very nice."

"So, here, it's now official. We'd like you to join us for Thanksgiving dinner if you don't have plans. Simone and Basil and Basil's girlfriend are going to be there too."

Asher mentioned that a few others would be at the meal as well: his brother, Pearce; his niece, Minnette; and her husband, Derrick.

"If you can join us, bring an appetite. Brooke makes a big deal over Thanksgiving, and she'll be hurt if you don't eat like a glutton."

In twenty years of living in New York, Theo had become intimately acquainted with the American holiday of Thanksgiving. He often celebrated the occasion with coworkers from his office, sometimes with friends who lived in his neighborhood, and a time or two at local soup kitchens. In other years, he chose to be thankful alone.

Once, shortly after moving to New York, he attended the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade where, with three and a half million other spectators, he enjoyed a frigid few hours, eyes upward as skyscraping balloons proceeded along the two-mile stretch from Central Park West to 34th Street and 7th Avenue. Such gatherings were not Theo's cup of tea, but he was in the company of friends and, being the generous soul he was, could not help but be swept up in the joy of the event.

And the presence of so many little ones brought his own dear child to mind.

***My Tita would love this,* he thought.**

Theo had no plans for the fourth Thursday in November, was honored to be on the Glissens' guest list, and accepted Asher's

invitation on the spot. He was pleased at the prospect of spending the holiday in a home, with friends.

Previously, he had only visited with Asher at the Chalice and the art studio. In his frequent walks through the Boughery, he had been charmed by the exterior of the Glissen residence. He hoped for an opportunity to see it from the inside someday and suspected the interior would be as picturesque as the outside. He wondered what aura, what feel, what ghosts might fill the old rooms.

Now he would know.

By Thanksgiving Day, the foliage of Broadway had fully surrendered to autumn. The ground was awash in the copper tint of oak leaves, the buttery ochres of elm and maple, and the varied reds of sweet gum and dogwood.

At one section of the Promenade, fallen leaves had drifted ankle deep at the curbside, like rust-colored confetti, in a way that children, and Theo, found irresistible. He stepped off the sidewalk and dragged his feet through the gathered softness, as if wading through a stream of slivered almonds. He chuckled at his own playfulness.

Entering the Boughery, he took note of three tall ginkgoes, as bright as Shekinah glory, blazing golden with evening light.

The sun was fast disappearing below the tree line, taking with it the mild temperatures that had accompanied daylight. Theo was wrapped warmly in a coat, hat, scarf, and gloves. He was carrying a bottle of wine that changed hands several times, right to left to right, as he made his way to 228 South Broadway.

CHAPTER 48

On lawns and in windows throughout the Boughery, Christmas lights were already on display, a hint of what was to come in days and weeks ahead. It was a gladdening sight as Theo made the final steps to Glissen House.

Asher was waiting on the porch to welcome everyone. With one exception, the guests all arrived precisely at seven. They exchanged brief greetings and pleasantries outside before being led by Asher through a wreath-laden front door into the warmth of the house.

Basil was dressed in a blazer and corduroy pants for the special occasion. It appeared that a brush or a comb had done battle with his unruly hair and had made moderate progress in bringing order out of chaos. When he introduced his girlfriend, Trina, to Theo, she stepped forward and kissed the old man on the cheek, taking a liberty that seemed instantly to exist between them because of their shared affection for Basil.

Theo grinned broadly, leaned into the kiss, and reciprocated. He held her hands in his own and said, "So, you are Katrina. Like the hurricane?"

Before she could reply, Basil cut in. "Actually, Theo, she's stronger, tougher, and more dangerous than the hurricane! Don't make her mad!"

Trina elbowed Basil playfully. She thanked Theo for the portrait and for being so good to her boyfriend. "He has told me all about you."

She was wearing a green gingham dress, square neck and long sleeves, with a cream-colored shawl to ward off the chill. Her demeanor, despite the stormy name, hinted at shyness. Theo liked her instantly.

Simone, the youngest member of the party that evening, had spent most of the day learning a new piece of music for an upcoming Christmas performance. Not a student or professor had entered the music building all day. The absence of any other activity or sound was unsettling to Simone — things, frankly, were too quiet, even lonely —

and he had found it difficult to get much done in the practice studio. The longer the day dragged on, the more he had looked forward to the evening.

He arrived with a cake in hand and, like Basil, was attired in finery: a starched white uncollared shirt, every button buttoned; light gray blazer; dark gray slacks; and black leather shoes. Theo guessed the outfit was from Simone's "performance wardrobe."

Gratefulness radiated from the young face. He was pleased to be among friends.

And at the other end of the country, a mother gave thanks that her son had a place to go on that holiday, so far away from home.

Minnette and Derrick had arrived earlier in the day, to help Uncle Asher and Aunt Brooke make final preparations for the evening feast.

Minnette's memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas were firmly anchored in Glissen House, where she had spent so much of her childhood with Gammy. As a little girl and teenager, she routinely helped Gammy in the kitchen, where she was given tasks suitable for her age, and where she felt needed and valued. Aunt Brooke and cousin Samantha were often there as well, especially on holidays. Minnette had learned from watching them what the phrase "mother and daughter" could look like in real life. (And, looking back on those days, she wondered if anything quite nourished friendship like the act of cooking together.)

In the week leading up to the dinner party, Aunt Brooke and Minnette had been hard at it in the kitchen, cutting, mixing, measuring, seasoning, and assembling a bedazzling collection of dishes. They frequently invoked Gammy's memory. "Now, when did she add this to the dressing?"

And they talked the talk of women who were privy to each other's secrets and free to speak in absolute confidence. Their long, sprawling conversations, which occurred while their hands were busy with casserole prep, careened from family issues to health issues to friend news to frustrations and challenges.

Minnette's ongoing friction with her father was a predictable part of such conversations. Aunt Brooke had a barely sustainable tolerance of Pearce's rude self-obsession, but she did a passable job of maintaining civility toward him. She tried especially hard not to be too critical or belittling of him when speaking with Minnette. He *was* Minnette's father, after all. And Asher's brother.

How, Brooke sometimes wondered, could two so very different people, her husband and his brother, come from the same home? She regretted beyond words that Minnette lived with such pressure to please her unpleasable father.

"How's work?" Brooke asked.

Minnette replied with an introductory groan. "Ugh. A grind. I can barely make myself go in lots of mornings. I was talking to a woman the other day who delivers newspapers to people's houses, before sunrise no less, and she said she loves her job. She's been doing it for thirteen years and only missed one day. And she says she loves it. I was so envious. Here I am, a CPA, making really good money and having this bright future in this respectable profession, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to say that I love my job."

Brooke nodded as she repeated a question she had asked numerous times before. "And you still feel like you can't leave it?"

Minnette exhaled her frustration and shook her head with an air of defeat. "After all it took me to get here? I guess it would be crazy to throw all that work away. And, my gosh, Dad would not let me live it down. He still has to remind me every time we talk of how much he sacrificed to put me through school. The martyr of Golden."

Brooke's face, and the shake of her head, registered pity (for Minnette) and contempt (for Pearce). After a brief silence, she lowered her voice (needlessly, since the house was empty) to ask a question only she would know to ask. "You and Derrick still thinking about having children?'

Minnette answered as she always did. "We both want to, really badly. The time just doesn't seem right."

At that moment, even the scent of plenitude, the sweetness of the holiday, and the surrounding beauty could not lift the heaviness of the young woman's thoughts. She had friends who lived with the burden of

childlessness because of infertility. *Her* childlessness was voluntary, the result of a college diploma and a career path.

And fear.

And success.

And something to prove. To whom?

The questions surrounded her like rabid dogs. She stood quietly at the counter and chopped celery.

On Thanksgiving Day, while Brooke and Minnette worked on food in the kitchen, Asher fulfilled an annual obligation that put his skill as an artist on vivid display. It was his job to set the long table in the dining room, a spacious area that was used on only the most significant of occasions. For most of the year, often for months on end, it sat regal and unoccupied.

Some considered rooms like this one, fancy and rarely used, as a pretentious waste of space and a long outdated display of snobbery. Others, of a more traditional bent, equated such rooms to a Holy of Holies, to be entered rarely, reverently, and expectantly. (Growing up, Asher and Pearce knew that the dining room was off limits for play. It was fiercely defended by their mother.)

At each place setting, Asher had laid silverware, bone china, and crystal glasses with exactitude of spacing and balance. Those dishes and cutlery had been in the family for generations. Lace-bordered placemats and cloth napkins, tied with ribbons, underscored the specialness of the evening. At each setting, delicate vases two inches high held tiny blossoms and cuttings from the backyard. An arrangement of flowers and fall foliage, bordered by two column candles, centered the table. All other available space was reserved for platters and dishes of food.

Name cards, in Asher's unique script, designated who would sit where. The choices had been well thought through by him and Brooke.

Soft lamplight created sectors of honey gold around the house. Gammy always preferred the diffuse lighting of scattered lamps and candles to the harsh brightness of overhead fixtures. Brooke and Minnette had both inherited that preference from her.

While final preparations were being made in the kitchen and the other guests mingled, Theo walked to an adjacent room, hoping some of

Asher's work might be on display. In fact, a number of pieces were hung throughout the room, but most were by other artists: a pen and ink wash of a cityscape, a still life of zinnias, an earth-tone abstract in oil.

Theo's attention was eventually drawn to a grouping of three small portraits, side by side, all in pencil. He was leaning toward them, hands clasped behind his back in his "studying posture," when Asher entered the room.

"I had a feeling you'd be wandering around."

Theo looked up. "I hope I am not being impolite."

"Not at all. Not at all." Asher looked at the portraits in front of Theo. "It probably seems a bit vain to have my own stuff on display, but usually I just bring 'em home to get 'em off the studio floor. Brooke selects which ones to hang on the walls."

"She makes very good choices." Theo nodded at the three portraits. "Asher, I know we only have a moment before the meal, but please tell me about these."

"Sure. All three of those are of my mom. She had such an interesting face, so much subtlety and character, always different and always the same somehow. So, this is her at twenty-five. I did it from a photograph. This is her at fifty. And this is her at seventy-five."

Theo noted: at twenty-five, spry; at fifty, settled; at seventy-five, tired. He nodded as he gazed at the triptych. "Once again, Asher, your work is remarkable. I don't know if she grows more beautiful left to right or right to left."

A call from Minnette in the dining room announced that the meal was ready to be served.

Accolades — about the appearance and feel of the house, about the aroma that greeted the guests and foretold the feast, about the weather and autumn color that had been so gloriously on display all week — were in generous supply.

Lightheartedness reigned.

Everyone was present but Pearce.

Brooke had learned, through a history of disappointments, not to wait for him. Frankly, she had been reluctant to invite him — even if he was Asher's brother — especially with first-time guests around the

table that night.

If he showed up, he would be welcome. But his absence, if he didn't, would would not be considered a loss.

Finally, everything was set. The table was worthy of a Rockwell painting. Brooke pushed a strand of loose hair from her face with the back of her hand, took off her apron, surveyed the abundance, and spoke the awaited words. "Well, let's eat. Happy Thanksgiving, everyone."

As if on cue, the front door opened, and Pearce stormed into the room. Everything about him suggested hurry. Before meeting or acknowledging anyone else in the room, he pretended an apology that quickly became an opportunity to assert his importance.

"Sorry I'm late. Aw, man, what a day. I have a bunch of guys working on a remodel down on First. A bunch of Mexicans, so they don't celebrate Thanksgiving. They're still down there. I told 'em don't even think about quitting till all the windows are glazed. You can hardly get decent help these days."

Brooke pretended a welcome in return. Her voice, so cheerful seconds earlier, was tense. "Well, Pearce, we're glad you could join us." Her face expressed a much different sentiment.

Asher introduced him to the other guests. Pearce nodded at them with hardly a glance until he looked at Theo. He hesitated, ever so briefly, as if trying to place the face. Had he seen the old man before?

In fact, he had.

Months earlier, on the bench at the Fedder. The Talker. The Phone. The Portuguese national anthem.

Theo, too, made the connection immediately but held his peace.

After meeting his fellow guests, Pearce yanked a chair away from the table and sat down. He was the first to do so.

The other men, following Theo's lead, stood until the three women were in their chairs. Pearce was oblivious to the gesture of respect.

When everyone was seated, Asher greeted everyone again. "Before we begin, I asked Theo if he would give us a blessing over the meal."

Pearce, who was already reaching across his plate to one of the casseroles, pulled back his hand awkwardly to wait for an "amen."

Theo focused his attention on Brooke. "Brooke, first, I think we owe

you our thanks. Simone and I particularly, both so far from our homes, are grateful that you have included us in your family today. You all," he looked at every face around the table, even Pearce's, "have been so kind. Asher asked me to offer a blessing. He told me a prayer would be permissible. Shall we?"

Everyone bowed their heads.

What followed was a short but eloquent recitation of recent gifts, with a pause before each.

The beauty of portraits.

Laughter at the Verbivore.

Ellen's love of songbirds.

The unhurried delight of thoughtful conversation.

The glorious mystery of music.

The willingness of Asher and Brooke to welcome others into their home. "For all of these gifts that point to You in heaven, we do give —"

A phone buzzed.

It was not loud, but given the profound silence that filled the room at the moment, it was inescapable. Pearce slid his chair back from the table, so he could remove the phone from his pants pocket. As Theo attempted to conclude the blessing, Pearce tapped the screen of his device.

When "amen" was finally pronounced, Pearce's head remained bowed over his phone, shaking in disgust.

"Dammit," he hissed. "They just broke one of the windows. Shhhhht. Did they have to ruin my Thanksgiving? Really?"

Asher was incredulous and ashamed. And speechless.

Brooke's face blanched with the fury of one publicly humiliated. Minnette's cheeks turned crimson with embarrassment, as if her father's behavior was her fault somehow.

Basil, Trina, and Simone were at a loss. The sweetness of the occasion had soured in a matter of seconds.

Theo broke the spell, speaking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Brooke, how would you like us to serve the food?"

With that, dishes moved, plates filled, "pleases" and "thank-yous" were exchanged, and an air of polite camaraderie gradually reclaimed the room. In short order, the stench of Pearce's grand entry was

overpowered by the mingled fragrance of warm sourdough, curried fruit, buttered wild rice, cinnamon sweet potatoes, ham, and turkey; in short, the same recipes that had been served on Thanksgiving Day for decades at that table.

Compliments to Brooke were plentiful.

As everyone ate, conversation tended to be one person talking at a time. Eight ate as one spoke.

Simone, in response to a question from Basil, explained the piece of music he had been learning earlier in the day. That led to Minnette asking Trina if she had a favorite song among Basil's repertoire, which led to Brooke asking Theo if he attended many plays or concerts in New York, which led to Theo asking Derrick if there had been any entertaining cases in the DA's office recently.

Theo wanted to ask about Mr. Mendez, the Guatemalan defendant, but thought it best to refrain, thinking the subject might be too heavy for such a convivial setting.

While the others ate, talked, and laughed, Pearce fidgeted, listening half-heartedly to the conversation. He had placed his telephone on the table for easy access. He checked it every couple of minutes, for no obvious reason. His fixation on the screen escaped no one's notice.

At one lull in the conversation, Asher cleared his throat in theatrical fashion for an announcement he wished to make. "Brooke and I have some very good news to share tonight." All eyes turned intently in his direction.

"Some of y'all haven't met our daughter, Samantha. She lives in South Carolina, just outside of Greenville. She's been working as a middle-school teacher for nine years, and if I say so myself, she is fantastic at her job. She teaches seventh graders at a low-income public school."

Basil shook his head. "God bless 'er. That's tough work."

Asher nodded. "Yes it is. I wonder sometimes how she does it, but she's just wired that way. She was teacher of the year in her third year there and is something of an authority on functional illiteracy among low-income adolescents — I think I said that right. We're really proud of her. She takes after her mother."

Minnette felt almost light-headed as she listened to her Uncle Asher.

What must it feel like to be *his* daughter? She could not imagine her own father, just five feet away, ever speaking of her in anything other than financial terms.

She had read, just that week, of a study done by Harvard researchers. Young people were asked if their parents would rather they be kind or be wealthy. The overwhelming majority had chosen the latter. She would have too.

Asher and Brooke seemed genuinely pleased that their daughter, Samantha, was kind.

“The reason she’s not here tonight is because she’s celebrating Thanksgiving with her boyfriend and his family. Our good news is that he’s going to ask her to marry him tonight. We fully expect that sometime later this evening, maybe even while y’all’re here, we’re gonna get a phone call telling us to get ready for a wedding next year.”

Minnette beamed and raised her glass. “To my dear Cousin Sam. Finally!” Everyone else, even Pearce, joined in.

“Brooke and I are so happy for them,” Asher said. “We think Samantha could have been single and content forever, but we love the young man and couldn’t have picked a better match for her.”

Then Pearce’s curt, dismissive voice broke the spell. “What does he do?”

The question had the feel of an accusation. Uncle Pearce had always thought Samantha’s choice of vocation — schoolteacher — was insanely shortsighted at best and a waste at worst. She was, by his criteria, capable of so much more. He hoped her choice of husband showed better financial judgment.

Asher said, “Cody is doing research on farming in South Central Asia. He spent the last two summers in Afghanistan helping villagers improve crop production. You know, they have some awful droughts over there.”

Pearce straightened up in disbelief and shook his head in disapproval. “You’re kidding me! Is there any future in that? How much does it pay?”

Asher tried to ignore the tone of Pearce’s question. “We have no idea, but he seems to have a serious sense of purpose about it. It makes me and Brooke a little nervous to think they might end up over there

someday — it’s a hard place for women — but that’ll obviously be their decision.”

Pearce guffawed. “That sounds ridiculous to me. If I were you, I’d put my foot down while I still could. Tell him there’s no way she ever goes over there. Taking care of your daughter is part of your job, you know. And, my god, tell him to get a real job. One of ‘em has got to make some money. Don’t they even think about being able to take care of themselves?”

Pearce’s contempt was threatening to reclaim the room again when Theo, in a stroke of diversionary genius, cut in. “Pearce, Asher tells me your mother grew up in this house.”

Pearce seemed surprised at being spoken to. “That’s right,” as if to say, “What’s your point, and who cares?”

Theo pressed on, “What was your mother like?”

Pearce’s face registered utter bewilderment. “What do you mean?”

“Well, how would you describe her? What sort of person was she? What made her happy? Who were her friends?”

It was obvious the question had yanked Pearce from some parallel universe, of which he was the center, into the present reality, where he was only one of the group. To be answered, the question would require at least some measure of humanity, some degree of introspection, and some reawakening of memory. Theo had, in effect, fired a poison dart at the heart of Pearce’s self-obsession.

Others at the table, especially family members, waited with total attention, eyes fixed on Pearce, as he stumbled toward an answer. Even Asher and Brooke weren’t sure what he might say or how he felt about his mother.

“She was a nice woman,” he said finally, followed by a long pause, a shrug, and a tilt of the head. “She was, I mean, hell, I guess you’d say she was a good mother. She had a favorite son, for sure. He was the golden boy, and I was the rebel.” Pearce nodded toward Asher. No one laughed. Asher offered no reply.

Theo, however, nodded toward a framed photograph on a sideboard near the table. “Is, uh, is that her in the picture?” The woman in the picture was looking directly into the camera — smiling countenance, gentle self-assuredness, steady eyes. She was holding two little boys, one in each arm.

“Yeah. That’s her. Long time ago. We were just little kids.”

“Which one is you?”

“The one on her right.”

“It looks from here like she loved the two little boys just the same.”

It was a daring statement to make, being as it was a direct challenge to Pearce’s previous assertion about his mother’s favoritism.

“Well, it didn’t feel like it. And there’s no doubt she adored her little artist. She was a nice lady, but I don’t think she really understood the value of things.”

Before Peare could say anything further, Theo broke in. “That, uh, that is a most interesting phrase, ‘the value of things.’ What do you mean by that? Where does one go to learn the value of things?”

Pearce snorted with impatience and disdain. When he finally spoke, the words reeked of condescension. “What is this, twenty questions? You’re kidding, aren’t you? Everybody knows the value . . .”

Pearce’s phone buzzed. He reached for it eagerly, relieved that the inquisition had been interrupted. He raised his left hand, index finger pointing upward, as if to signal, “Hold on. This is important.”

The others listened in. They had no choice.

Pearce rolled his eyes in disgust. “You’ve got to be kidding me! . . . How did it happen? . . . What the hell? You damn well better have insurance on your crew. I’ll be right there.”

Pearce finished the call. He held up his hands in mock exasperation as though he hated that he must leave such good company. Once again, he scraped his chair noisily away from the table, rose, and turned to leave without a word of thanks or good wishes. He never acknowledged his daughter.

The front door closed loudly behind him.

What followed was an awkward silence and a collective sigh of relief, as if a cactus had just left a room full of balloons.

Asher broke the silence. “Y’all, I’m so sorry. I don’t really know what to say. That’s just the way Pearce is. We had hoped for a better version of him to show up this evening, but what you got, I’m afraid, was typical Pearce.”

Theo replied promptly, even cheerfully. “Well, nothing at all took away from the most delicious Thanksgiving meal I have ever had in my life. Here’s to Brooke, the chef, and to Minnette, the sous-chef.”

He raised his glass, arched his eyebrows, and looked at Minnette, whose expression brimmed with weariness and hurt. Everyone joined the toast and tried to pretend that Pearce had never been in the room.

When glasses were returned to the table, Brooke announced dessert. "Maybe we can get some sweetness back into the evening."

Plates were served and coffee poured. Theo turned to Minnette. "So, Minnette, same question to you. Pick up where your father left off. What was your grandmother like? What did she value?"

Conversation, congenial this time and steeped in praise of Gammy, continued until more than one pair of eyes showed signs of drowsiness. Asher finally thanked everyone for joining them, insisted over the objection of willing volunteers that he would clean the kitchen, and turned on porch lights for safe passage down the front steps.

Theo touched a palm to Brooke's cheek as he repeated his gratitude for her hospitality. He did the same with Minnette. He told Trina how happy he was to finally meet her and expressed his hope that they might visit again sometime soon.

"There is a fine musician who performs on the sidewalk where I live. Maybe you could meet me there one night to hear him sing and play. If he does a really good job, we'll leave him a big tip."

She kissed his cheek again.

Theo and Simone left Glissen House and walked down South Broadway together. When they reached the music school, they parted ways, Theo to continue home and Simone to retrieve his cello before doing the same.

As he walked up the stairs to the apartment, Theo heard Christmas carols in the distance, amplified down the Promenade from one of the few bars open for business that night. He turned to look at the river and the lights on the western shore.

CHAPTER 49

Duty called, and there were matters that could only be handled in New York, none terribly urgent but all in need of Theo's close attention.

He left Golden in early December, intent on spending the Christmas holidays and New Year's Eve in the city.

When he got off of the plane at LaGuardia, he waded through a bouillabaisse of humanity before stepping out of the terminal and into a hard-falling snow. The moderate and occasional chill of Golden was quickly forgotten in the fierce and settled cold of New England.

As freezing air spread through his old bones, Theo longed for the climate of the Promenade.

And already he missed his neighbors there.

It is rumored that some people take long trips at Christmas simply to get away from the burden of obligatory gift giving and the seasonal rush of activity at home. The strategy seems a sane response to an otherwise insane time of year.

When Theo left Golden in early December, he might have appeared to be one of those people, a refugee from the excesses of the holidays. In fact, and much to the contrary, he had taken pains to somehow remain present with friends in Golden during his absence, meaning that he bought gifts well in advance to be delivered while he was away.

Three days before Christmas, Mrs. Gidley walked to the Verbivore and passed through the gauntlet of Penny Loafers; the temperatures were still mild enough that, on sunny days, one could sit comfortably outdoors in a sweater or light jacket. She entered the chaos of the Verbivore, stepped over and around stacks of books, and found Tony at his desk, doing paperwork.

"Good morning. Mr. Wilcox?" she asked hesitantly.

"Call me Tony. Yes, ma'am, what can I do for you?"

"My name is Anita Gidley."

"And you work at Ponder House. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Gidley. I've seen you going in and out of that building for years."

“Thank you. And it’s nice to meet you too. Yes, it’s hard to believe we’ve been neighbors all these years and never spoken.”

Tony might have pointed out that Mrs. Gidley had walked by the Verbivore several thousand times over the years without so much as a glance in his direction, but he bit his tongue.

They shook hands. She held out a box to him. It was elegantly and precisely gift wrapped, deep-green paper and burgundy ribbon. Tony could not help but wonder why this woman, a stranger just thirty seconds ago, would give him a Christmas gift.

”I’m delivering this at the request of a friend,” she explained. “And there’s a note for you too.”

Tony cleared a space on his desk and took the box. “Well, thank you, or thank whoever. This is quite a surprise.”

“I’m just the messenger, but I’ll pass along your thanks. I think you’ll be pleased.” She smiled warmly. “Merry Christmas.”

She glanced around the room at Tony’s cluttered desk and floor. He read her thoughts, laughed, and scratched his head. “It’s a mess, isn’t it?”

She had no reply for his statement of indisputable fact. She just raised her eyebrows, tilted her head, and grinned.

Tony was going to make his poverty spiel — “Please buy a book; I’m only a week or so from closing my doors” — but thought better of it. She might not understand his humor. She didn’t seem the type. Instead, he thanked her once more, invited her to stop by again sometime, and wished her a good holiday.

When she left, Tony looked at the typed note. “Do not open until Christmas morning.”

From the Verbivore, Mrs. Gidley went to the music school at the college in search of Simone. She found him easily enough, practicing a cello piece in one of the rehearsal rooms. She introduced herself, apologized for the interruption, and gave him a box and an envelope. Simone, as Tony had been, was surprised, curious, and grateful for the anonymous generosity. He flew home the next day and took the gift with him.

Over the course of two days, Mrs. Gidley delivered gifts to Theo’s considerable circle of friends, a dozen or more. In the process, their

surprise and happiness became hers. She wondered if she was feeling, in some measure, the pleasure that Theo had tried to describe to her about the portrait bestowals.

She was using muscles in her face, and expressions, that she had not used in a long time. More than once she was hugged. And on Christmas, a cold, gray, stormy day in Golden, when the recipients opened the gifts, she was at home imagining their delight and vicariously sharing it with them.

And with Theo.

Every gift was accompanied by a handwritten letter. Theo had composed each one to include words of gratitude, words of encouragement, and words about the Christ child. Each was specific to the recipient.

Simone was not totally surprised, given the length of the gift box, that he was the owner of a new bow for his cello. He *was* surprised, however, by the excellence of the item, a genuine Emil Werner made of Pernambuco wood from Brazil. Exactly the sort he had hoped to own someday. Exactly the sort he had mentioned offhandedly to Theo when they drank coffee at the Chalice and talked about the cello.

The note, in Theo's elegant script, included an encouragement:

There are songs in this bow that only you can play. Play well. For the angels.

Eight-year-old Lamisha unwrapped her package carefully, slowly, giddily. It was a large box in which were three smaller boxes. One was filled with paints, brushes, pencils, drawing pads, and a jeweler's loupe. One was filled with all four volumes of *The Wingfeather Saga* by Andrew Peterson. The third was a pair of shoes, as blue as morpho, with short heels, made of patent leather, à la Dorothy's in the story of the Wizard. (It was not a terribly practical gift, but what kind of Scrooge gives only practical gifts anyway?)

Lamisha also received a note:

There never was, there never will be another like you, dear child. You are fearfully and wonderfully made, a princess, a daughter of the King.

Merry Christmas.

Adoringly,
Theo

And Ellen, the inventor of featherwood? What gift would be appropriate for her?

Per her instructions, after their "bird tour" months earlier, Theo had filled his gift of featherwood with bird feathers collected one at a time on his walks through town. Being on the lookout each day for stray bits of plumage had proven entirely delightful to him and a healthy exercise in attentiveness. The result was an astonishing array of beauty that became Theo's favorite *objet d'art* in his apartment. It would, in fact, have been equally at home, and as impressive, in Mr. Ponder's office. Its shape, size, color, texture, curvature, and composition rivaled any other piece in the whole of the consultant's elegant building.

It was featherwood that Theo had in mind when he chose Christmas gifts for Ellen.

Four items seemed most suitable: a foldable handsaw, a compact cordless sander and drill, and a wood burner.

With the saw, she could cut the wood sections she would need. With the sander, she could smooth and buff the ends of the cut sections. The drill would replace the icepick as a tool for putting holes in one end of the wood and, with the wood burner, she could emboss her name or date, or both, on the bottom end.

Theo went to a local hardware store and purchased tools that were simple, lightweight, and safe, having in mind that Ellen would probably want to keep them with her on the Noble Invention. He assumed that, when necessary, she would be able to recharge the batteries at the Mission.

For good measure, Theo also purchased a scarf of Portuguese cashmere to include with the more utilitarian gifts.

Mrs. Gidley entrusted the rather large box to Jason at the bike shop, with the request that he deliver it to Ellen the week before Christmas. He was glad to do so and was able to put the gift in her hands at the Mission on Christmas Eve. Along with the gift, Theo had written a

detailed letter that explained the various tools. He added the following suggestion:

> *In the future, perhaps you could make some of your featherwood pieces available for sale. I think many people would enjoy having one of their own.*

It was a tantalizing possibility.

On a separate page of his letter, Theo had sketched a basic logo, a small feather, and the words "Oxbow Featherwood." It was visible proof of his belief that Ellen, the artist, was capable, with some help, of becoming Ellen, the entrepreneur.

As she read his letter for a second time, at the sentence in which he called featherwood "a stroke of creative mastery," she straightened up in her chair, smoothed her dress across her lap with her hands palms down, and looked self-consciously at her reflection in a nearby windowpane.

She would not disappoint Mr. Theo's confidence.

She was also very pleased that, in his letter, all the subjects and verbs agreed.

She spent a considerable part of her rainy Christmas Day figuring out how she might store and transport the tools on her bike.

She also wondered if it might be possible to have her logo embossed on drinking cups like Jason had done.

The Christmas presents Theo chose for his friends had been painstakingly selected. For weeks in advance of the holidays, he listened and looked for clues as to what sort of gift they might like to receive, in hopes of purchasing items that were beautiful or useful or pleasurable to each recipient.

How else could he have known, for instance, that Addie collected antique glass and amber? Or that Grandmother Whitaker enjoyed word-search puzzles? Or that Mr. Ponder was an opera enthusiast?

In New York, on Christmas morning, he imagined each of them in Golden, in their various homes, opening their packages. Bestowals.

For all of them, Theo's gift would be one among many. Except for Tony. He had no other boxes to open. Only Theo's.

Tony did not typically "practice" Christmas. Still, he could not help but be childlike with wonder as he opened his single present. It felt a bit awkward, being by himself at the Verbivore, in the same chair where he sat when he and Theo drank brandy. Same dim light.

I must look pretty pitiful sitting here all alone.

He chuckled at the thought.

In a nod to the holiday, he had turned on his radio to the annual broadcast of "A Service in Carols and Readings" from King's College in Cambridge.

Outside, the rain continued. The Promenade was empty and quiet.

"In the Bleak Midwinter."

He used a tiny pocket knife to ease the ribbon and paper off the package. He was in no hurry whatsoever.

Inside the box were two smaller boxes, both wrapped. Tony opened one and lifted the lid of a wooden box.

It held a bottle of port, bearing the authenticity seal from Porto. And a note:

To your health and our friendship, both of which are gifts to me.

Gratefully,
Theo

Tony whispered an affectionate profanity, and then, only slightly louder, “You good old man. You dear old soul. Merry Christmas, Theo.”

He held the bottle out to examine it.

Vintage 1968.

A choice neither accidental nor random.

1968.

His last combat in Vietnam. Tet. The best cup of coffee he ever drank.

“. . . The roots can only grow in stony, difficult ground. The pruner’s shears cut deeply. The grapes are crushed and kept in the dark for decades. For the sake of the sweetness. For this moment.”

Tony stood, retrieved a wine glass from his desk, returned to his chair, opened the bottle as slowly as he had opened the box, and poured a glass of the garnet liquid. He held it up for a few thoughtful seconds before drinking.

Rain continued to fall heavily and noisily on the sidewalk in front of the store.

The confluence of stillness, kindness, memory, port, and Christmas hymns brought a wave of tenderness to the bookseller’s state of mind, and glimmers of something like hope to a heart that had become almost unbreakable.

He finished the glass of port in no hurry and poured another to sip while he opened the remaining gift.

It was a book. A signed first edition. Ernest Hemingway. An extravagance. With a note.

If all else fails, and you have no choice, sell this for cash to keep the doors open just one more week.

Christmas wishes,
The Godfather

For the weeks following Christmas, the apartment atop Ponder House remained dark. But it was not unnoticed. Many were the ones

who walked by, glanced up, and looked forward to the day the old man would return.

CHAPTER 50

December 25

Dear Asher,

It is a dreary, blustery day - a White Christmas - here in New York City. If I were surrounded by field and forest, instead of concrete and steel, the holiday would look like all the ones beautifully pictured on the greeting cards. But thankfully, even here, the Hudson River and a generous population of trees give nature a strong presence. So strong, in fact, that, an hour ago, I was tempted to risk the slippery sidewalks for a stroll outdoors. Instead, I have chosen a safer alternative and am very happy to spend time, pen in hand, with ones like you and Brooke "if only in my dreams."

I checked the weather report for Golden a short while ago, and it appears to be as sunless there as it is in the Northeast today. Against that bleak backdrop, I picture you and Brooke, and possibly a newly engaged Samantha, enjoying the same warmth that filled Glissen House at Thanksgiving.

By now, late afternoon, I'm certain Mrs. Gidley has received her portrait. Can you imagine the expression on her face when she answered the doorbell, looked down, and saw dear Lamisha standing there, package in hand? I have to believe that the exquisite gift was made doubly so by the manner in which it was delivered. I hope so.

Thank you for doing the portrait on such short notice and at such a busy time. And again, my gratitude for making the bestowals possible these past months. Every portrait has been, in a very real sense, an Advent, a Christmas, a giving of life.

Speaking of portraits. I heard a lovely homily about "faces" this morning. The pastor offered the opinion that, when we are born, our first instinct — "far deeper than intention" — is to find a face. Our weak and blurry little eyes, wide open but not yet trained to see, search for something, someone, with which to bond. I am inclined to agree with him. You?

Do you recall the first time you leaned in close to look at your newborn daughter? Did you have a sense that you and she were both reaching toward each other somehow, to speak a language too deep for words?

Didn't it seem that your Samantha (and my Tita) were trying somehow to recognize and understand our faces when they first looked at us?

I have a close friend who is an eye doctor and a man of great depth. He holds firmly to the belief that the most important (and formative and effortless) thing a parent can do for a baby is to gaze into his or her face, to hold him or her close and engage the eyes. Could anything be simpler? Is anything more profound? Does anything more deeply change parent and child?

I wonder if, like newborn children, we go through our entire lives looking for a face, longing for a particular gaze that calms and fills us, that loves and welcomes us, that recognizes and runs to greet us. Is that perhaps what this day, Christmas, is all about?

It is an imponderable thought that the Giver of Faces, the face of heaven itself, the face for which every heart yearns, became a wee babe, misty eyed and helpless, looking Himself for the tender face of His mother on the night of the angels.

Might that blessed face find you and Brooke in good health and glad spirits today.

I look forward to seeing you soon. Till then, every good thing, and Merry Christmas,

Theo

P.S. If you see Ellen, please tell her I saw a blue jay this past week in Central Park. From what I could tell, it seemed to be missing a tail feather!

There was no return address on the letter or the envelope.

CHAPTER 51

Theo slipped quietly back into Golden. He had not told anyone when he might return and, by mid-January, it was not unusual for conversations along the Promenade to begin with questions, "Have you heard anything from Theo? Do you know when he's coming back?"

He arrived in Golden near the end of the month. His first stroll down Broadway was punctuated by enthusiastic hugs and greetings that carried the distinct feel of a homecoming.

For him, the mild weather of Golden was a respite from the snow and cold of New York City. Daffodils and crocuses were already visible in the lawns of the Boughery. A spate of warm days, not at all uncommon to southern winters, had seduced flowers and shrubs into early blooms. Soon, a hard freeze, also not uncommon, would chasten those tender buds for their impatience.

But no complaints from Theo. Not that day. It was a day of welcome.

In short order, he had spoken with most of his inner circle.

Shep and Addie were doing a brisk business. Even the mild southern version of "cold weather" was good for sales at the Chalice.

Asher had added six portraits to the gallery while Theo was gone. A half dozen new bestowals.

Tony was still begging for book buyers and predicting the imminent failure of the Verbivore.

Simone was preparing with admirable diligence for his upcoming recital, still fighting headwinds with the hockey player on his back, but now with a Werner Pernambuco bow in hand.

Lamisha had written and illustrated her very first story, about a little girl with blue shoes who convinced her classmates to wear different colors.

Kendrick was still working the night shift at the college. Sometimes he sang loudly when the halls were empty.

Ellen still rode the Noble Invention up and down the Promenade, but she spent more time indoors at the Mission, especially on cold days. She had been perfecting her featherwood design and making good use of her Christmas gifts. In doing so, she was being changed somehow by ownership of those simple tools and the prospect of having a business, rising in the world by having something that she could nurture and call her own, even if it *was* only sticks and feathers. She was excited to show Theo her works in progress, almost as excited as he was to see them.

Theo stopped by Mr. Ponder's office and delivered a folder of documents for safekeeping until further notice.

And with that, he settled into the fickle weeks of winter that would make up February and March. He renewed his routine of walking, reading, sitting at the river, and chatting with friends. The cold was hardly a bother.

He visited the Chalice most days.

Shortly after his return to Golden, he purchased a dozen portraits and began writing letters to the intended recipients. Though he would not be bestowing those portraits for a while, he began to compile a calendar of when, and to whom, they would be given in the coming months.

His days were quiet, but they were not wasted as he awaited the blossoms of springtime.

CHAPTER 52

Theo looked at his calendar. The date in March was circled.

"It's been a year? Already, a year?" And so it had.

One full year he had been living on floor number three, Ponder House.

His plan for the day? A walk of celebration.

He put on his hat and a sweater and inspected himself in the mirror. His was an undeniably old face, but even to him, it lost decades of age when he smiled. And so he did.

"Don't fool yourself, Mr. Theo," he teased himself as he looked at his reflection. "You are an old man. But you look quite dapper today, if I say so myself. Happy anniversary, *idoso*."

He opened the back door, greeted the morning, bowed slightly to the river, and headed for the street. The Promenade was brimming with students and business folk.

As he walked, Theo stopped at every familiar face to express his gratitude for the year that Golden had given him. Simone the cellist. Shep the barista. Derrick the prosecutor. Katherine the journalist. The gaggle at the Verbivore.

"Top o' the mornin,' Mr. Theo."

"Tony, it is a glorious day indeed! I am on an anniversary walk. Today I have been in Ponder House for exactly one year. Tony, my boy, at this very spot, you told me about Ponder House. So, I came to thank you, for being my friend and neighbor. It has been a good, good year, and I hope you can remain open for at least one more week."

"Wishful thinking, Theo, wishful thinking."

He bumped into Minnette at the Chalice. He had not yet seen her since his return from the holidays. They hugged and then stood facing each other, holding hands.

"Hello, my dear. How is Asher's favorite niece?"

She smirked playfully. "His *only* niece is doing just fine. And I'm glad to see you again. I was afraid you would never return to Golden after the way my father behaved at Thanksgiving."

Theo waved it off. “Nonsense. That was an unmistakably wonderful evening. So, so good. And Minnette, I will continue to believe that even your difficult dad is capable of saintliness.”

Minnette raised her eyebrows and snickered incredulously. “Well, if he gets there, it will belong in the ‘miracle’ column.”

Theo nodded. “Indeed, that is the only column there is, my dear, for any of us. So, Minnette, I’m on my way to the Boughery. Do you know if your Uncle Asher is at his studio today?”

She nodded. “He is. I went by there just a little while ago to deliver his tax return. He could probably use a bit of friendly company about now.”

Theo leaned toward Minnette. “Strong,” he whispered. “Brave. Kind.

It’s all still there. I see it even more clearly.”

She smiled. “A miracle?”

He grinned.

Leaving the Promenade and walking south, he continued past Symphony Hall and into the Boughery. He would make the loop, walking down the east side of the street, crossing the median to the west side, and stopping by Asher’s on the way back to Ponder House.

To stroll through the Boughery on a spring day like this one was to walk through a gauntlet of azalea blossoms — ten thousand mouths opened wide in laughter or song.

Theo had once assumed that these abundant blooms would be a gift to local beekeepers, until he learned that their nectar, and that of other flowers in the genus *rhododendron*, was toxic and unsuitable for honey. So toxic, in fact, that, once upon a time, receipt of a black vase filled with azaleas was to receive a well-known death threat.

Had Theo known of that practice earlier — on the awful afternoon when the jealous boyfriend destroyed the portrait of Mia — he might well have sent a very black vase filled with a large number of azalea blooms to Cleave Torber. But no longer. That venom had diluted by now, and Theo felt more pity than anger toward the young man.

Life was too short for azaleas in black vases.

The phrase “poisonous beauty” formed in his mind. He wondered if there might be other things that, like azaleas, were beautiful and toxic at the same time.

Let me think . . . rattlesnake, jellyfish, hemlock, black widow, words without wisdom, power without compassion, appetite without boundaries, pleasure without gratitude, art without humility.. . . I wonder if Basil could write a song called "Poisonous Beauty."

In the journal where Theo kept lists of birds and trees and bestowals, he also had a section he captioned "plants in common." In it, he recorded varieties of flowers that grew both in Golden and in or around Pinhão. The list had quickly grown from fifteen to forty. The latitudes of the two cities, 32N and 42N, and their proximity to the ocean were one probable explanation. Regardless of the explanation, the lawns and gardens of South Broadway were replete with reminders of his childhood home in Portugal.

Was it possible that, at some time in the distant past, before Morning Glory appeared on American soil, one small, hard-shelled seed from that elegant vine had departed the Douro Valley, hitchhiked or floated down the river, into the ocean, through the West Indies, across the Gulf, up the still-unnamed Oxbow River, just in time to settle down in the soft mudbank and begin to grow? Or maybe it had happened in reverse, the Oxbow to the Douro? Probably not.

Still, like so many other notions that passed through Theo's mind when he took his daily stroll or sat beside the river, it was a pretty thought and a subject of contemplation — of journey — as he walked through the Boughery to Asher's studio.

He spotted Asher's bicycle on the porch, a sure sign that the artist was somewhere nearby.

He walked up the steps and knocked on the door. A voice responded from the side of the house. "I'm around here."

Theo retraced his steps and found Asher on the south lawn, kneeling beside a flowerbed, busy with the ritual of spring planting. He was wearing faded jeans and a flannel shirt, rolled up to the elbows. His ungloved hands were covered in dirt.

"Hello, Theo, this is a nice surprise." He rubbed his palms together and wiped them on the front of his jeans. "I'd shake your hand, but I'm a little messy." He stood, walked a few steps to the back of the house, and returned with a lawn chair.

"Have a seat, Theo. If you don't mind, I'll keep planting. What brings you this way?"

They made small talk, took note of the one-year anniversary, commiserated about the necessary evil of taxes, and paid tribute to the splendor of the season. Asher pointed out the varieties of flowers he was

planting: speedwell, echinacea, coreopsis, all chosen with pollinators in mind.

Asher held up three small plants in a terracotta pot. "Here's a new one." Theo leaned forward for a closer look as Asher explained. "I noticed these in the woods up in Harris County last summer when Brooke and I were hiking. The guy who owns the land let me mark them, so I could dig them up during the winter when they were dormant. I don't know if they'll survive here or not, but I brought lots of soil from that spot to put around them. And the partial shade ought to help. I figure if I plant them now, maybe they'll have time to get comfortable before they're supposed to bloom. Hope springs eternal, right?"

Theo nodded. "Indeed it does. Especially for gardeners, and especially at this time of year. Let me guess what you have there."

Theo bent over to examine the three plants. Eight or so inches tall and obviously still growing. Strong stems. Leaves opposite, oblong, heavily veined.

"I believe these are asclepias of some kind. In New York, these are quite rare."

Asher smiled. "Exactly. They are native here but still not very common. *Asclepias variegata*. Milkweed. That might well be the most inaccurate common name in all the plant kingdom. I don't know how anyone could categorize it as a weed. Have you ever seen one in bloom?"

Theo nodded. "Breathtaking. If not milkweed, what would *you* name it?"

Asher had an answer ready. "Since you've obviously seen one, you'll understand. Crown of Many Crowns. Or Globe of the Kings. *Maybe Globus imperialis*? Right?"

Theo grinned his approval. "Very good, Asher. That's perfect. You should contact the flower police and make your case. That would be perfect. Crown of Many Crowns. I hope they do well here. You would both be in very good company."

Asher stopped planting, straightened up, put his thumbs in his back pockets, and cast his eyes over the bed of flowers. "This is the sort of thing I learned from my mom. She enjoyed using native plants for her

garden. Glissen House is full of things she dug up in the woods or down by the river. Plant nurseries would go broke if everybody was like her. The likelihood of these surviving would be a lot better if she were here. Spring planting always brings her back to life for me somehow. I wish she could be here with us right now."

Theo nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "I'm sure it would make her quite happy."

The two men held a brief silence. Then Theo stood to leave. "Well, let me not distract you from your children any longer. If it's alright with you, I'll check on them from time to time when I'm walking by."

Asher nodded. "I hope you will. Maybe speak to them in Portuguese."

"Yes, by all means. I shall indeed. Now, before I go, Asher, I want to thank you again for being so kind to me this past year. It has been a crown of many crowns for me. I can never repay you."

"That goes both ways, Theo. It has been quite a good year, hasn't it?

You ready to resume the bestowals?

"Of course! Next week I begin again. I'm so happy."

As Theo closed the gate behind him, Asher waved. His dirt-covered palm brought to mind the fisher-painter of long ago, the dark river mud of Pinhão, and the tireless effort that some expend to cultivate beauty in the world.

Theo walked to the riverside.

Sat.

Watched.

Walked home.

Full.

CHAPTER 53

April 12. Willa Francesca's birthday.
A feather, the pale gold of butter.
Theo placed it in a card to Ellen with a handwritten note.

Ellen,

I found this bit of blonde feather by the river today and thought of your Willa. Beautiful things sometimes get separated from their rightful place.
I wish you a pleasant Golden day and Willa a happy 31st birthday.

Grateful,
Theo

Well intentioned? Entirely.
Affectionate? Unquestionably.
Heartwarming? Perhaps.
Upsetting? Possibly.
Wise? Maybe not.
"Should I send it?"
Theo removed the feather and tore up the card. Maybe next year.

CHAPTER 54

With springtime, the sound of birdsong returned to Broadway, as did a chorus of other familiar noises: chatter at the sidewalk tables, children's laughter, outdoor music, lawnmowers and trimming tools.

Longer, warmer days allowed students from the university, many of them dress-rehearsing for upcoming year-end performances, to set up in the school's outdoor courtyards and play selections for anyone willing to listen. In addition to street sounds and buskers and car stereos, one heard fragments of bassoon, viola, or clarinet. If a musician could survive there, the rationale seemed to go, it would be easy to perform in a beautiful, acoustically perfect, quiet room with attentive listeners.

Hearing the odd mixture of sound one afternoon, Theo imagined a Philip Glass-esque composition of "Duet for French Horn and Leaf Blower." There had been odder pieces, after all.

It was the season of recitals at the college.

Most evenings, some student seeking "partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Music Performance" paced nervously backstage, awaiting their moment in the spotlight. Months of study, hundreds of hours of rehearsal, and moment after moment of sometimes torturous isolation, all came down to this — the recital. In the span of a mere hour, give or take a bit, it would be over. An ocean in a thimble.

Student recitals were held in Bettye Hall, a small, opulent venue that dignified every performance by the sheer power of its elegance. A student who took center stage there could boast ever after that he or she had been somewhere truly special.

For audience members disinterested in music — keep in mind, many came to recitals purely out of obligation — the beauty of the hall itself was reason enough to be there.

The focal point of the room was an Opus 60, LeTourneau organ — a musical *and* visual work of art, fifty-eight tubes of tin-and-lead alloy,

the smallest a mere twelve inches high, the largest thirty-two feet. It was positioned at the back of the stage and hovered ten feet above the floor, overlooking performers like a guardian angel. Everything about its shining presence suggested royalty, significance, order, and airiness.

The room held 250 cushioned seats, all close to the stage, on two levels. A balcony wrapped like a half moon around the upstairs, and a high ceiling provided ample space for the movement of sound *and* silence. Above the stage and the house, twenty-six large retractable lamps, in a motif of pine cones, floated like hot-air balloons and dispersed dimmable light through the room.

Music majors referred to the room as "the Bet." "New York's got the Met. We've got the Bet."

On a Tuesday night in that very room and on that very stage, Simone and his cello would perform "in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master's Level Artist Diploma in Cello Performance."

He spent the day doing a final run-through of the pieces on his program, took a short walk with Professor Gobelli, ate a light meal, and then changed into his concert clothes in a backstage dressing room.

At that point in his young career, Simone was comfortable in front of audiences and felt only a mild energizing nervousness as he anticipated the recital. He had worked doggedly to be ready for that night. And not just ready but thoroughly so, to honor the composers and the songs he had chosen for his program. By the time of his performance, he was a finely tuned combination of discipline, passion, fine motor skills, and muscle memory.

If Simone *did* happen to feel a tinge of stage fright before his recital, it derived from two sources: First, from knowing that his friends and acquaintances up and down Broadway — Theo, Tony, Shep, and others —would be in attendance. Word had gotten out, and, at least for that one evening, Simone would be the pride of the Promenade. Second, from knowing that the performance was to be filmed for his family and close friends in Seattle. In lieu of their attendance, a camera would be set up to live stream and record the evening. This meant, of course, that any and all of his mistakes or imperfections would be permanently preserved, like an insect in amber.

Simone did not doubt his ability to perform the selections on his

program with excellence, but for the sake of his friends, he wanted the evening to be enjoyable rather than merely obligatory, and he hoped they would leave the concert glad for attending rather than relieved at departing.

Finally, recital hour arrived.

CHAPTER 55

The Bet.

Rows E and F. Beneath the dimmable light.

Left to right, facing the stage: Row E — Kendrick, Basil, Trina, Asher, Brooke, Lamisha, Theo, Ellen, Tony. Row F — Addie, Shep, Mr. and Mrs. Ponder, Mrs. and Mr. Gidley, and the Penny Loafers.

Elsewhere in the room, friends and classmates, faculty members, and others filled the seats. The packed room was affirmation of the respect and affection with which the music department embraced the young man.

A single chair awaited him at center stage. No music stand. No mics.

No props or decorations.

Backstage, with five minutes to go, Simone awaited his introduction, humming, stretching his fingers, and pulling at the sleeves of his black tuxedo and white shirt. The sartorial finery was standard practice for Simone, dating back to his earliest performances in high school. His band teacher, a bastion of decorum, had instilled in Simone and his peers that "your wardrobe is a small, visible way to honor the music you play as well as the guests who listen to you play it. Look beautiful. Play beautiful. Be beautiful."

It was so old fashioned. But there did seem something right about it. Those sitting in rows E and F were gussied up as well, out of respect for the young musician. Blazers and starched shirts for the men, dresses for the women. Ellen was ablaze with color, a pastiche of springtime. She was an azalea bloom, astilbe and spirea, galardia and wisteria. A walking bouquet of flowers.

Incidentally, she was allowed to bring the Noble Invention into the building. After Theo assured her it would be kept safe, she agreed to leave it locked in the cloakroom under the watchful eye of a security guard.

With a gun.

Theo leaned toward Lamisha, who was sitting on his left, and spoke in a library whisper to her. "You see the big lights above the stage, the

pine cones?”

She looked up. Nodded.

“Tonight, when Simone plays his songs, the music notes will come out of his cello, and they will fly in every direction. You see, all the notes are inside his cello right now. But when he moves the bow, like this,” Theo gestured, “it is like a key that opens the door, and out they come, one at a time. They look like this.”

Theo sketched quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes on the back of the program so that Lamisha could envision the flight he was describing.

“You see? The round part here is their tummy, and these are the wings. Tonight Simone will set them free, and they will fly around us so fast we might not even see them.

“And do you know what they do when they fly away? They hide. Many of them will go straight up and hide in the pine cones. And some will hide in the organ pipes. And some will hide in the curtains and under the seats.

“And then, late, late tonight, when everyone has gone home, they will all come out of hiding. And they will have a big celebration because they are free. And they will make their very own song, one only they know.

“And sometimes, if someone is in the building late at night, they hear strange sounds and think it’s a ghost, but really it is only all the happy notes at their big parade.

“So, as we listen tonight, look for the flight of the quarter note, OK? Maybe you can draw it.”

Theo pulled a number 2 pencil and a small drawing pad from his coat pocket and handed them to Lamisha. Those items would be well-used before the concert was over, to capture the flying notes — the stems, the heads, the flags. All those wings and tummies.

Lamisha knew it was a made-up story. But as the concert began, she watched the cello like one who believed.

Precisely at seven, the lights dimmed, and Professor Gobelli stepped on stage, welcomed the audience, explained the purpose of the recital, and asked that people “extinguish” their cell phones.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Simone Lavoie.”

Simone appeared through a small door left of center, cello in hand, made the short walk to the middle of the stage, stopped beside the chair that awaited him, and took a bow. There was still enough light for him to see faces in the audience. He smiled at rows E and F, the epicenter of applause, bowed again, and sat.

A man of lesser confidence might have chosen to begin his recital with a simple selection, something manageable to help him work out the butterflies or jitters. But Simone was not that man. His first song was one that most students, if they would attempt it at all, would save as the high point or finale of their set.

“Toccata capricciosa, Opus 36,” by Miklos Rozsa.

From the first forceful notes of the piece, Simone took ownership of the room. Even the disinterested and unschooled could not help but be captivated by the virtuosity of his performance.

Those in rows E and F who had previously only known Simone as a pleasant and reserved pedestrian walking to and from class each day were mesmerized by the creature he became under the enchantment of the music. And some in those same rows understood for the first time that the bulky object (“the hockey player”) he carried on his back was possessed of power no less potent than thunder and lightning. No wonder Simone was so protective of it. This cello was his flesh and bone, heart and soul, language and voice. It did not merely belong to him. It was part of him.

The demure Simone, with cello cradled in his arms, was a force of nature. Electrified. Ravished and ravishing.

Arms, hands, shoulders, neck, head, eyes, legs and feet: every part of him felt the song and brought it to life for the audience.

Or perhaps for the angels.

His face, eyes closed, displayed agony and delight, playfulness and veneration. As he played, he turned his head hard right, smiled rapturously, mouth sometimes wide open, as if gasping for breath, a captive to the splendor of the sound that swirled around him.

From Kendrick all the way to the Penny Loafers, from the quixotic mind of Ellen to the orderly intellect of Mr. Ponder, from the breadth of Theo's elder perspective to the youthful innocence of Lamisha, all of rows E and F were under a spell. Captives themselves.

The man on the stage was a Simone they had never seen before. They were fascinated.

They were proud.

Lamisha was almost certain she saw quarter and eighth and sixteenth notes flying to freedom.

For six minutes and fifty-six seconds, the room was transfixed. But at the end of the piece, when Simone stood for a bow, the audience was already on its feet applauding, faculty members first.

Simone left the stage, took a sip of water, returned, and sat again. His face was glowing with perspiration. He paused to close his eyes, take a breath, position his fingers and bow, and visualize the next song.

The selection was the familiar "Bach Cello Suite No. 1 in G major," the very piece of music, performed by the great Casals, that had lured Simone to the cello when he was in high school. Even those in the audience who didn't know cello music recognized the piece.

At the end of two and a half minutes, it was done, and a calm filled the room. More applause.

And then, because a recital required that esoteric pieces be included to prove a student's proficiency, Simone performed four sections of a Sonata by Eugene Ysaye and then a four-minute passage from Attila Bozay's "Formazioni." The Bozay selection was atonal, dissonant, arrhythmic, and technically interesting, but it overtaxed the attention spans of most in the audience.

Tony tried his best to listen attentively, but he also wondered what the Penny Loafers might be thinking and what they might say tomorrow

about “that weird song.” He predicted at least one of them would complain, “You couldn’t even tap your damn foot to it.” A true statement.

“Or hum along either.” A valid criticism.

“I wouldn’t even call that stuff music. I couldn’t even pronounce the name of it.”

Tony almost burst out laughing at the anticipated discussion.

A member of the music faculty, on the other hand, would have said that the composition embodied “rich technical complexity in dystopic tonalities” and that it had been interpreted masterfully.

Simone finished the piece, though it took an awkward moment for the audience to figure out it was over, and then left the stage to polite applause.

When he returned, a grand piano had been rolled into place. For his last selection before intermission. Simone was joined by a slender middle-aged woman in a black evening gown. The program identified her as a faculty member, Dr. Hisa Takai, of Japan. She bowed, sat, and waited as Simone took his seat.

They played “Requiebros” by Gaspar Cassado of Barcelona, a piece Theo knew well.

“Requiebros,” a Catalan word meaning “flirtatious remark; amorous compliment.”

For Simone, it was fourteen pages of score, thousands of notes, and measure upon measure of meticulously scripted musical emotion. He had memorized every playful, sassy, and romantic detail of the song.

It was a mere four minutes and twenty-three seconds long, but it instantly pushed Bozay’s dissonance out of the room and replaced it with a melody that was joyous, danceable, even hummable for ones who, like the PLs, deemed that a musical virtue.

He executed it flawlessly, or so said the faculty members who were there to grade his work.

When the song ended with a hard stop, Simone and Dr. Takai froze — her head bowed low over the piano keys, his face bent skyward with closed eyes — as the last note slowly died.

The audience, on the other hand, clapped, stood, whistled, and shouted. Pianist and cellist thawed to the praise, nodded and smiled

and applauded one another, and then faced the crowd.

Rows E and F were awash in glee.

Intermission.

CHAPTER 56

The second half of the recital began with a hauntingly beautiful, even mournful, evocation of a Bohemian forest, Dvořák's "Lasst Mich Allein." Simone was joined again by Dr. Takai.

Dear old Theo closed his eyes to listen to the music. And to ponder.

Was it a winter forest that Dvořák had in mind? Was the sun breaking through clouds? Was the composer alone? Walking? Standing still?

Four minutes and ten seconds of sublime beauty.

Other selections, heartfelt and technically precise, completed the second half of the recital, concluding with a melody that fell like a benediction over the room, a duet with Dr. Takai of the "Carnival of the Animals; the Swan," by Camille Saint-Saëns.

Simone played the final note, dropped his head, let his body relax, looked up with a smile, and stood for yet another bow and a wave of applause.

In response, he applauded the audience, as best as he could while holding a cello and bow in his hands. He nodded to Theo and friends and then left the stage. The crowd remained in place, applause undiminished, and began to call for an encore. Such a call was perfunctory for student recitals, but they were not always obliged.

Simone had played all the songs listed on the printed program. He had done what was required of him, and, in light of the mental, physical, and emotional workout of his performance, he would have been within his rights to remain backstage and hurry home. Once the evening's adrenaline wore off, he would feel the exhaustion of recent long days.

But return to the stage he did, smiling broadly.

He had removed his tuxedo jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. He motioned for the audience to be seated.

"It is unusual for a recitalist to speak," he said once the room was quiet, "but I've been given permission by the faculty to do so. I would like to introduce the next song and to thank you for requesting an

encore. I don’t know what I would have done if you had simply left the room, since I’ve really looked forward to playing this final piece. Thank you. But actually, I think I would have played it anyway.”

Laughter.

“This last song is an original composition. I have learned in recent months that there is a song tradition in Portugal called ‘fado’ music. It is a genre that dates back at least to the early nineteenth century in Lisbon. In some ways, stylistically, it is like American folk ballads or even some types of country music. Think George Jones and the Grand Ole Opry. The songs can be about anything, but they often have sad tunes and lyrics. One source says they are ‘infused with a sentiment of resignation, fatefulness, and melancholia,’ the perfect sort of song to end the night with, right?”

More laughter.

“Fado is usually played on Portuguese guitar, classical guitar, and a four-string version of acoustic bass called Viola Baixo. And there is always a vocalist.

“I would like to end the night with a song called ‘Fado for Theo,’ written for my dear friend from the Douro River Valley of northern Portugal.”

Simone turned his full attention to a beaming face with quivering lips. Theo was visibly touched, teary, and surprised. He knew now perhaps how recipients of *his* bestowals felt.

Unconscious that he was even doing so, he reached for Ellen’s hand on his right and Lamisha’s on his left.

“I offer this song as a gift of thanks for the many kindnesses my dear friend has shown me in the past year,” Simone continued.

He held up his Pernambuco bow horizontally, obviously wanting the audience to know it was at least one of the kindnesses he had in mind.

“Of course, to be fado, I need guitar and vocals. And so, I’d like to introduce and welcome my co-writers and collaborators, Basil Cannonfield and Kendrick Whitaker.”

Applause.

Basil and Kendrick made the short walk forward and took their places beside Simone. The magic of surprise was palpable up and down rows E and F, especially on Lamisha’s nine-year-old face.

The three musicians positioned themselves close together, the better to hear one another and to blend their voices.

Looking toward the stage, the audience beheld Kendrick on the left and slightly in front of the other two, Basil in the center, and Simone, still seated, on the right.

The contrast among them is striking.

Stocky and muscular, short black hair with a sheen, deep dark eyes. Gray dress suit and lipstick-red shirt, shiny light-gray pointed dress shoes.

Tall and lanky; long, shaggy blonde hair; blue eyes. Denim shirt (starched), dark vest, dark jeans, and brown leather ankle boots.

Medium and graceful; a wiry tangle of tight, inky black curls; deep brown almond eyes. Sweaty tuxedo.

A custodian. A busker. A virtuoso.

"Now, if we are to be criticized or faulted by any fado purists in the room tonight, it could be on grounds that our song is not sad enough. Please forgive us. We tried to write something thoroughly depressing, but we might have failed. If you know Theo, sadness is not the first word that comes to mind when you think of him. Any good performer saves the best for last. We hope you enjoy 'Fado for Theo.'"

Basil counted in the song. "One, two, a one, two, three, four."

Even the most cultured and sophisticated members of the audience could not resist smiling, tapping their feet, and leaning in when the unlikely trio began the tribute to their mutual friend.

It was not the sort of song one typically heard on a recital stage. But after such a riveting and masterful performance of his formal program, Simone had earned the opportunity to play something for the common man. And for no small number in the room, "Fado for Theo" was the most accessible of the renditions played that night as well as the musical highlight of the show.

It was certainly that for Theo.

Again the audience rose to its feet, cheering, as Basil, Kendrick, and Simone stood close together and took a collective bow.

Before the applause died down, Professor Gobelli entered through the stage door. A student also came from backstage to relieve Simone of his cello. Basil and Kendrick returned to their seats.

The professor cleared his throat and said, “I have attended many recitals over the years, and I have played in hundreds of concerts. I think you will agree that tonight has been truly a night for the ages. And while we have departed a bit from the way we usually do things, we have celebrated music — the writing of it, the performing, the listening, the sharing, and the enjoyment of it.

“Simone, thank you, for honoring our department and for giving us such a memorable experience this evening. We’ll keep our fingers crossed that you earned a passing grade.”

The audience chuckled.

“One more thing remains to be done. And for that, I invite Mr. Theo to the stage.”

Theo rose and made his way to the stage. He hugged Simone, whispered something in his ear, and then turned to face the audience.

“Simone, for us all, I say thank you. When you told me many months ago you were preparing for a recital, I could not have imagined this night.

“I *would* make mention that it is a great misfortune your father and mother are not here to witness your performance in person. I *would* make mention of it if it were true, but thankfully that is not the case. Mr. and Mrs. Lavoie, would you like to join us here, please?”

As the room buzzed with surprise, Simone saw movement in the shadows of the balcony. It dawned on him that his parents had been there for the entire evening.

They walked forward. Welcoming applause and warm embraces met them at the stage before Theo spoke again.

He addressed the small audience as if he were addressing royalty. And in his mind, he was.

“It is customary to honor great musicians and artists at the end of their careers, sometimes even years or decades after they have gone silent. That custom often includes the presentation of a portrait. Tonight we will reverse the order of things, and rather than wait till the end of what is certain to be a career of excellence and accomplishment, we,” Theo gestured to the row of his friends from the Promenade, “would like to bestow a small measure of honor, and a portrait, on our dear friend Simone.”

Asher walked forward and stepped up beside Simone, draping his arm across the young cellist's shoulder. Two students entered from backstage. One set up an easel, onto which the other placed the portrait, covered by a blue drape.

Theo turned to Simone's parents and spoke directly to them: "I know what it is to love a child and to want, above all else in life, that they be good and wise and happy. In honoring your son tonight, we also honor you. It is written somewhere that 'most people die with all of their songs still inside them.' Thank you for protecting Simone from that terrible fate. Because of you, he blesses us."

Theo turned toward the easel.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Maestro Simone."

Asher very gently — this was his recital, too, in a sense — unveiled the portrait.

It was drawn in various grades of dark graphite and white charcoal on gray paper, mounted beneath a two-inch white matte and held in a black frame with gold beading and raised edges. It was rendered from a photograph obtained by Professor Gobelli at Asher's request.

Simone had clearly not been striking a pose for a camera when the photograph was taken. He was lost in whatever song he was playing at that moment, eyes half open and relaxed, dreamily so, as if in a spell.

If his countenance were indicative of the selection he was playing, one would likely guess the song was pastoral, slow, melodic.

The portrait was rendered as a long rectangle, twice as wide as it was high. It featured Simone's face and his left hand on the cello's neck, just inches from the headstock. His right arm, only partially visible, was extended for a draw of the bow on the left side of the portrait.

Theo announced that the portrait would be shipped to the home of Simone's parents. Mrs. Lavoie clasped her hands over her heart in gratitude. It would take a sizable section of wall space to accommodate so large a frame. No one doubted she would find room for it.

Finally, the recital was a *fait accompli*.

The audience, in no hurry, trickled out of the hall. Friends and faculty stood in a reception line to admire the portrait and congratulate Simone.

After a while, only his parents, and those who had been sitting in rows E and F remained.

They were a striking assortment of humanity, brought together by admiration for the young musician. Theo moved among them like a proud father. Simone graciously received a steady flow of compliments. Eventually, the Promenadeans were herded out of the room together.

Lamisha glanced over her shoulder at the overhead lamps as the security guard turned them off. She imagined all of those notes in hiding up there somewhere.

Simone excused himself briefly to secure the cello in his instrument locker. Once he rejoined the others, they walked en masse to the Chalice, where coffee and celebratory cake, in the shape of a cello, awaited them, compliments of Shep and Addie.

After an hour or so, members of the party began to take their leave, each with mind and heart full. They all had lots to talk about on the way home.

Ellen rode away on the Noble Invention, her blue hat bobbing like a cork on a fish pond as she moved up the Promenade.

As he walked to Ponder House alone, Theo thought to himself, *I have tasted heaven*.

Before he fell asleep that night, he relived the day in his mind. *This might well have been the happiest day of my life. Thank you, Sir. Thank you.*

Simone walked his parents to their nearby hotel. He and they moved as ones in a dream, elation in every step.

Simone stayed with them well past midnight, answering questions and telling stories about his Golden friends. He was delighted at this unexpected reunion with his parents, and pleased at the prospect of

giving them a proper tour of Golden the next day.

Eventually, exhaustion weighed on his eyelids.

He kissed his parents goodnight and walked into the familiar nocturnal quiet of Broadway.

He stopped by the school to retrieve his cello before walking slowly home for much-needed and well-deserved sleep.

He hummed as he walked. Fado for Theo. Such a wonderful occasion.

“A night for the ages.”

CHAPTER 57

At first, Theo thought it was a bad dream.

It was well after midnight, and most of the weeknight revelers had retreated home, leaving Broadway to its slowly gathering silence. He had gone to bed shortly after the party for Simone, had slept soundly for several hours, and had then awakened for no apparent reason. Perhaps the adrenaline and the afterglow of Simone's recital were still at work in his body and mind.

He put on his robe, walked to the front of the apartment, and opened the balcony doors for fresh air. Then he returned to the kitchen for a drink, chose a book to read, and settled into his easy chair in the front room. The last intermittent bits of late-night noise — voices, car doors, engines rumbling — floated in from outside. Theo sat and turned a few pages, but as the clock approached two o'clock, he struggled to keep his eyes open. He finally gave way to sleep, his head rolling to the right and resting on the chair back.

If he had been on the balcony, awake, he might have seen Ellen on her bench at the Fedder. He might have heard her singing. She was wearing her hat, sitting with her hands in her lap, the Noble Invention parked within arm's reach. It was the same tranquil scene Theo had witnessed several times before.

The same, that is, until the athletic figures of three boisterous young men, moving southward down the median, approached the fountain. They were unsteady on their feet, bantering and laughing too loudly for that hour of night, pushing and jostling each other as friendly drunks sometimes do.

Their sort of joviality was a familiar sight along the Promenade — partygoers and bar crawlers ending the night with a final blast of noise and energy, annoying to residents who lived along the Promenade but otherwise harmless. Theo had been told that brawls sometimes occurred, usually incited by too much drink, and that revelers frequently ended up in the fountain, but he had never witnessed any such incidents.

The street lamps and store lights had long since gone dark as the three men ambled toward the Fedder. Aside from their indistinct voices, an eerie silence prevailed. There was no one else on the Promenade.

When they saw Ellen on the bench — the odd little woman apparently oblivious to their presence — their attention turned away from one another and toward her gaudy hat. It became an object of inspiration to them, a prize to be captured, a trophy to be taken. The pranksters, thinking her to be as drunk as they were — why else would she be sitting there talking to herself? — deemed her fair game for a bit of fun. And why not end the evening with some pointless bravado?

“I dare you,” one whispered to another. “Get the hat, and I pay for breakfast.”

The other smirked. “Done. One ugly-as-hell hat coming right up.”

Their banter ceased as they drew near the fountain. Ellen was either unaware of or chose not to acknowledge them with so much as a turn of her head. She was, after all, accustomed to the sight and sound of rowdies and mischief-makers. She had learned it was best to ignore and avoid them.

The daretaker gave a thumbs-up to his friends, crept up on Ellen from behind, snatched the hat, and began to run. He had pulled Ellen’s hair in the process, which both pained and startled her. In an instant, she was on her feet, swearing and fearlessly chasing the thief.

It was an awkward, hopeless pursuit.

She could not possibly match the young man’s speed and had only taken a few clumsy strides when she heard a voice behind her.

One of the other two hooligans, the largest of the three, seeing her bicycle unguarded, had grabbed it with a shout and wheeled it toward the fountain. Ellen turned, realized what he intended to do, and sprinted, as best she could, to stop him. He was lifting the bike to heave it into the Fedder when Ellen reached him from behind. She grabbed his hair, screaming and swinging furiously, scratching, gouging, and slapping the man’s face.

She fought like one who had done so before, flailing with an energy and agility that were relentless and feline. She was a creature out of control. Her shrill voice knifed into the silence of the Promenade, more a war cry than a call for help, but her words were unintelligible, if, in fact, she was speaking words at all.

The bike vandal quickly abandoned his intention of drowning the Noble Invention. His one thought became self-defense as blood filled his right eye and ran down his cheek. Ellen had jumped onto his back, wrapped her legs around his waist, and was clawing viciously at his face as he struggled for balance. He feared she might have a blade in her hand.

Their voices were a cacophony of howls and profanity.

The young man dropped the bike, eventually forced Ellen’s arms from his neck, and freed himself from her grip. All the while, she

slapped, clawed, scratched, and kicked as if her life was at stake. When he was finally able to put an arm's length between them, he grabbed the collar of her dress, bellowed an incoherent roar, and swung full force, striking her with a solid, sickening blow to the face.

And then another. And a third.

The sound of fist on bone and the sight of skin breaking into a scarlet stream aroused an animal fury in the man. He was an instrument of unbridled rage as he drew back to strike her again.

Before he could do so, she fell to the ground in a heap, dazed and unsteady. Blood poured from her nose, her mouth, and a gash over her eye. She gagged on broken teeth and lay barely conscious at her attacker's feet.

But he was not yet satisfied. The sight of blood, his and hers, had made a beast of him. He was poised to kick Ellen when, out of the shadows, Simone charged, head down, cello on his back, and knocked him to the ground.

Theo was baffled when he first heard the voices.

When he walked through the open doors of the balcony, still disoriented from the stupor of sleep, it took some effort to make sense of the scrum in the median.

A woman on the ground?

A bicycle beside the fountain lying on its side? Ellen?

"No, please. No, stop. Please," Theo begged, in a voice hardly more than a whisper. He might as well have been talking to himself.

He saw what he believed to be a cello case on the ground near Ellen's bench as it slowly dawned on him that Simone, too, was involved in the melee.

The breathless old man watched dumbstruck as two of the strangers held Simone while the third struck him repeatedly. When they finally threw him to the ground, one of the assailants slammed a heavy boot, full force, onto the back of his hand.

Simone heard and felt the breaking of his bones. He tried to scream but his depleted lungs could muster little more than a ragged gasp.

The trio concluded their brutality by heaving the gentle young cellist into the fountain.

Throughout the attack, they had spewed a steady stream of curses

and slurs. They could not hear Theo over their own voices and mistakenly assumed no one was witness to their violence.

Fueled by conquest, still angry at the old woman's attempt to defend herself, and emboldened by the absence of any other people, one of the three ruffians opened Simone's case and removed the cello with another string of invective.

"Stop! Please, please, stop!" Theo shouted with both arms outstretched, his body leaning dangerously across the low balcony rail. Two faces turned to look up just as the third raised the cello over his head. He shattered it against the bench, then threw the remaining shards into the water.

Theo leaned forward to utter a final plea. "Oh, please no! Please no!"

At that, the threesome sprinted away into the shadows, leaving behind a bleeding woman, a battered musician, a splintered cello, and a dented bicycle.

Simone and Ellen were not aware that Theo had witnessed the incident. They were stunned, bloody, and delirious from the attack they had just endured. Simone managed to crawl out of the pool and was simultaneously trying to help Ellen *and* find his phone — difficult to do with a broken hand and a swollen eye — when they heard a woman scream at the front door of Ponder House.

A young couple, college students, had been walking home from work. Now the girl stood motionless, one arm extended rigidly at her side and the other raised to her face. Her mouth was open but silent after the one scream. Her companion was bent at the waist, looking down with caution at something on the sidewalk, as if the object at his feet might bite or lash out at him. He straightened up, stepped back, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his phone.

Simone had enough presence of mind to know that Ellen was critically injured and needed medical help. He was not able to find his phone, so he looked to the young couple as his best hope for assistance. He would ask them to call the police and an ambulance. He left Ellen at the bench and staggered across the street to where the couple was standing on the sidewalk. The young man was on his phone, speaking urgently. The girl remained speechless, hand to face, mouth still open.

Simone looked down, saw a crumpled form beneath the splayed

fabric of a robe, and noticed a small pool of blood spreading outward on the pavement. He knelt, leaned close, turned the body gently, and gasped.

He felt himself going faint.

Theo.

CHAPTER 58

News of the tragedy spread quickly the next morning, first along the Promenade and then throughout the city.
Yellow crime tape marked the spot of Theo’s death.

That short section of sidewalk attracted the grief-stricken, the angry, the curious, and the incredulous throughout the day following the assault.

Looking back, it seems odd that crime-scene tape was placed there. The assailants had committed their violence in the median, nowhere close to the sidewalk where Theo fell. There was no forensic evidence to be gathered from the patch of concrete, other than the corpse of the old man. In fact, the tape seemed less to identify a crime scene than a shrine, less to isolate a place of past violence than to hallow the site of a good soul's lingering presence.

Cards, notes, and bouquets of flowers soon began to multiply in tribute to "the saint of the Promenade."

Patrons of the Chalice — it was not far from the perimeter of tape — hesitated as they entered the shop, some to ask "What happened there?", others to shake their heads because they knew.

The day following the attack was unbefittingly beautiful. Bluebird skies and placid breezes seemed ill-suited to the storm of emotion that settled over Broadway. It was equally incongruous that so private a man would die in such a public, scandalous way. After all that he had done to maintain anonymity, to be unnoticed, and to live outside the public view, one might rightly question heaven for allowing him to be a front-page item in the local newspaper. How impolite that one like Theo be reduced to gossip fodder.

As to the incident itself, the authorities reached the simple, reasonable conclusion that Theo had simply fallen over the balcony rail, the eighteen-inches-too-low rail, about which Mr. Ponder had given warning when discussing their rental agreement a year earlier. From the ground, looking up, it was not hard to imagine what had happened: Theo standing at the rail, bending at the waist, leaning forward — too much so — to make some sense of what was happening at the Fedder, lifting his hands in shock at what he saw, losing his balance, and plummeting to the pavement below.

When police had arrived, Simone was dazed and traumatized but responsive to their questions. Ellen, bleeding profusely, was disoriented, and moaning incoherently to herself. She was barely conscious and fully unaware of what had happened to Theo. Neither she nor Simone

could give the police a full name of the deceased man on the sidewalk.

“His name is Theo,” Simone told them. “That’s all I know. His name is Theo. Theo. Theo.”

Weeping. Gasping.

“Oh, Theo. His name is Theo.”

When paramedics arrived and began tending to Simone’s injuries, he mentioned in a moment of relative calm that James Ponder was Theo’s friend and advisor. With that, a middle-of-the-night call was made to the consultant’s home. He arrived at Ponder House within minutes, identified the body, spoke with investigators, and began the long and unpleasant process of telling the world that Theo was dead.

It was a long night.

Mr. Ponder’s first call was to Asher.

Then to Mrs. Gidley, who received the news in stunned silence as the composed and unflappable James Ponder gave way to tears — as foreign to him as smiles had been to her before Theo entered their lives.

He called Simone’s parents from the lobby of their hotel and had them driven to the hospital.

He called Tony.

Then Derrick.

And then, Shep and Addie.

And Kendrick.

He returned to Ponder House and placed calls to New York.

The first hints of daybreak were on the horizon as he drove home to change clothes and prepare for the sad, busy days ahead.

An investigation of the crime and a hunt for the assailants was begun immediately. Absence of witnesses or cameras, the darkness of the hour, and the suddenness of the incident made law enforcement skeptical of success.

The Eye of God, only feet away from the brutal attack, had, of course, seen it all.

CHAPTER 59

Three days after Theo's death, while the investigation continued in Golden, and Broadway mourned its loss, an article appeared on the front page of New York's most prestigious newspaper. Social media and other news outlets picked up the story, and it quickly reached the eyes of millions. Among that vast audience was a particularly interested subset in the art world. The New York headline, all caps in thirty-six-point font, read:

RENOWNED ARTIST DIES IN FALL

A smaller heading added:

Reclusive Genius Leaves Behind Prized Collection

The article was equal parts obituary, biography, encomium, investigative journalism, human interest, and cultural news. It filled a generous portion of the front page and half of another. Two photographs — one of a brooding, middle-aged, bearded face, the other of an art gallery — accompanied the text. A longer article, which included the full text from the newspaper, appeared on the paper's website.

Renowned Portuguese-American artist, Gamez Theophilus Zilavez, known throughout the world as "Zila," died Thursday morning from injuries sustained in a fall at his temporary residence in Golden, Georgia. He was 87 years old.

Known for a career that spanned six decades, Zila belonged to the prolific group of 20th-century artists whose work garnered record-breaking sales in the latter half of the century. Like other notables of the era, he was a one-name celebrity whose fame as an artist was almost equaled by his reputation as a recluse. For the past three decades, while his art received critical praise and enthusiastic bids at auction, he was rarely seen in public. His New York office aggressively guarded his privacy and granted no interviews.

His works are among permanent museum collections and galleries around the world, including the National Gallery in London, the Petit Palais in Paris, the Uffizi in Florence, and the Metropolitan in New York City.

He was also an avid collector of art. His private collection, at the famed Zila Gallery in Chelsea, houses a wide range of styles and periods, including pieces by Delacroix, Courbet, Gauguin, Kahlo, Basquiat, Rosetti, and Picasso. It is one of the most highly valued private collections in the US. He sometimes modestly referred to himself as "a businessman."

Zila was born on October 28, 1932, in Pinhão, a village in northern Portugal. He had no siblings. His father and mother, both deceased, were agricultural laborers in

the wine country of the Douro Valley and, as recounted by Zila in early interviews and articles, encouraged an aesthetic sensitivity in the boy.

After an encounter at age ten with a “painting fisherman” on the banks of the Douro River — a story captured in the BBC documentary titled Painting in Portuguese — Zila began drawing and painting with pencils and watercolors given to him by his grandmother.

As a teen, he worked the vineyards of northern Portugal, an internationally demarcated region where grapes have been cultivated since the 18th century for production of port wine. His burgeoning talent as a young artist serendipitously came to the attention of Edmund Timmons, owner of the famed Timmons House Distributors in London and an avid collector of 19th-century art.

Timmons became a benefactor to the young Zila, encouraged his development as an artist, introduced him to noteworthy art movements of the day, underwrote his education in the Paris School, and brought him to the attention of curators and collectors throughout Europe.

Zila subsequently repaid the favor by investing substantial amounts in Timmons House Distributors after disastrous floods destroyed many of the port cellars of Vila Nova de Gaia in 1969.

By the time Zila completed his studies in Paris, his work had received critical acclaim and was on display in exclusive European galleries, even as avant garde and modernist movements dominated the art market. Patronage of wealthy collectors, fortuitous acceptance by well-known curators and gallerists, and a charm that made him a darling of the public contributed to his early success.

The young Zila, like many of the Paris ilk, studied and experimented with modalities of cubism, impressionism, and minimalism. He ultimately returned to classical realism, what he sometimes described as “the abandoned child of modernity’s disillusionment.”

His rise in the art world was often described as “meteoric” and, by some, unwarranted. His work faced fierce denunciation from critics who argued that his style was outdated, simplistic, and apolitical. His greatest achievement, some believed, was his ability to survive the hostile world of art criticism and curation.

Zila’s iconic large-canvas Boat #216 was chosen by the IAA as one of the fifty most significant works of the 20th century. It is on permanent display at the United Nations. Its unveiling in 1987 was the last notable appearance made by the artist, aside from a handful of unpublicized, unannounced appearances in Portugal in subsequent years.

Before leaving the public stage, he conducted numerous master classes throughout Europe. He also held short professorial roles, including an early stint as artist-in-residence at the Prado in Madrid from 1960 through 1962.

Among his lesser-known achievements was designation of a color known as Zila green by the Schmincke Mussini Company in Germany. The artist helped develop the tint from a mixture that includes sediment from the Douro River.

Zila had an avid interest in and maintained an extensive collection of portrait art, which is on permanent display at his New York gallery. In addition to his own portraiture are pieces by John Singer Sargent, Carl Larsson, and Anders Zorn.

Zila was married to Swiss heiress and socialite Celeste Hargue. They had one child, a daughter. Mother and child were killed in an automobile accident in 1987, a loss that sent the artist into a deep depression which his publicist later coined “his

walking season.” Following a year in which he produced no new work, he returned to the art market with a flurry of abstract pieces that were eventually collected and toured in an exhibit entitled “Ecclesiastes.” Selections from that display are now permanently housed at the Tate in London.

Zila never remarried.

His great fondness for rivers resulted in a 1998 collection of fifteen canvasses entitled “The River Suite.” The collection celebrates waterways of the US and Europe. The paintings were popularized internationally through their use in campaigns by various government and private organizations to advocate stewardship of native rivers and clean water.

Zila had, as well, an ardent interest in birdwatching. He frequently made excursions to locate new species for his birding list and contributed a series of sketches, gratis, to the Cornell University School of Ornithology in 2001 in support of its work.

The artist was inducted into and received honors from numerous international arts organizations, many of which include him on their lists of significant artists of the past century. Though he declined invitations to the ceremonies that honored him, he often sent eloquent handwritten letters of gratitude to sponsors of the events.

The often lengthy letters, which, taken together, embody a thoughtfully articulated philosophy of art and creativity, were compiled in a collector’s edition of his work on his 80th birthday.

In one of the most notable of those letters, which accompanied a portrait of his friend and musician, Pablo Casals, he quipped that “The only reason I am an artist is because I do not have the genius to play cello.”

Over the span of his career, Zila lived in Paris, Florence, Rio de Janeiro, and New York. He traveled extensively. His reason for being in Georgia at the time of his death is not known.

Zila died from injuries sustained when he fell from the balcony of his residence. An investigation of the incident is ongoing.

Zila’s longtime personal assistant and gallerist, Anais Metoir, in a phone conversation with this writer, stated that, “I spoke with Zila last week. He was doing very well. Contrary to the public perception of him as a tragic, lonesome, brooding artist, he was happier perhaps than I have ever known him to be, certainly happier than at any time since his daughter died. He was fully invested in the art of living. The world has lost a giant. I have lost a very dear friend, and I will miss him terribly.”

Funeral arrangements have not yet been announced.

A sidebar to the article contained a final item of information about Theo.

A spokesperson at the Zila Gallery stated that the last paintings known to have been done by the artist, completed earlier this year, was a six-canvas collection called “The Blues of Golden.” It includes images of a hat, a pair of shoes, a pill bottle, a feather, and a riverscape. The collection is soon to be on display at the gallery.

CHAPTER 60

To be clear, few citizens of Golden actually knew Theo.

His local fame was confined to the downtown district, though the driver of bus number 37 and members of the hospital staff had their own stories to tell about the good-natured visitor. The wider community learned about him after his death, through newspaper and television stories, social media, and gossip. Goldenites were surprised and curious that such a man had selected their town for his residence and had dwelt so quietly in their midst.

How could someone of such renown — and why would someone of such renown — choose their city? And how did he escape their notice? How, in a world where every hand holds a camera, could he achieve anonymity for an entire year?

Among those who knew him, even those who knew him merely as a cheerful presence along Broadway, he was remembered not as a celebrated artist or collector but as an acquaintance, neighbor, and friend. On sidewalks up and down the Promenade, people shared stories and reminiscences of Theo's year in Golden. From those fragments, they constructed an image that was nothing short of mythic.

Those who knew him best held their peace and declined to be interviewed or drawn into the mob of the carelessly inquisitive. Even Katherine Lesker, whose journalistic instinct was to write, kept her silence in reverence for Theo's memory and out of respect for the promise she had made to him at the Fedder, a promise from which she was now most certainly freed.

There were, not surprisingly, insistent, professional writers — bloggers, art aficionados, reporters from New York papers and magazines, an international journalist or two, and even, early on, a documentary filmmaker — who pursued whatever rumor or lead they could find in hopes of telling Theo's story. Eventually, perhaps, they would pierce the inner ring of his friends and get the details for which they yearned, but in the immediate aftermath of Theo's death, silence reigned.

More than one reporter tried to approach Ellen while she was a patient at the hospital following the attack. When Tony, who rarely left her side during the week and a half she was there, learned of their intrusion from Mrs. Van Blarcum, he searched them out, dressed them down with an eruption of curses, and swore to invoke every means, legal and not so, to protect the woman.

And "hell no, I won't talk to you! Get your ink-wasting ass out of here."

In time, he might soften, but not yet. He kept a close eye on Ellen.

As Theo would have wished.

Members of the press were pleased, accordingly, to learn that a memorial service had been planned for Theo at St. James. Perhaps there, they would be able to harvest information for an interesting story with anecdotes and reminiscences. In all fairness, people around the world, for good reason, wanted to know about the famed artist's death.

Theo's body had already been flown to France and buried beside his daughter's in a private ceremony near Paris. Mr. Ponder had worked and would continue to work with Theo's lawyers and business associates on a number of estate matters, including the funeral. But he did not, and would not ever, violate Theo's confidence, though he, as much as anyone, was convinced of the world's need to know Theo's story.

On the evening of the memorial for Theo — two weeks after his fall, at seven o'clock on a Thursday, the precise hour of so many of his bestowals — the sanctuary at St. James was filled to overflowing. Many members of the church, ones who had seen him regularly on Sunday mornings, were in attendance. Business owners, students, waiters and waitresses, the homeless, and the merely inquisitive filled the pews.

By an arrangement that had somehow been made and communicated to the affected parties, everyone who had received a portrait from Theo was invited, as if they were family, to sit in the front rows. Some brought their portraits with them. A handful of others who had not yet received a portrait — Shep, Tony, Mr. Ponder, Lamisha, Mrs. Van Blarcum — were also placed front and center. Ellen, by special dispensation, was allowed to bring her bicycle to the front of the

sanctuary and park it beside the pew. She was still feeble, bruised, and bandaged from the incident at the Fedder. Many were surprised that she was well enough to attend.

But even in her delicate state, and even in the company of her Noble Invention, she exuded a tender dignity as she joined the procession of the portrait people.

A sign at the entrance of the church building, politely worded but clear in its stern intent, instructed members of the press, local and not, to respect those in attendance and to remain at the back of the sanctuary.

And to all, press and friends alike, a notice was prominently posted:

> In honor of this sacred place and today's memorial, we ask that there be no photography or recording of the service. Before entering the sanctuary, please turn off all cell phones, recording devices, and cameras, and place them out of sight. Violators will be removed from the service.

As if to emphasize the sincerity of the warning, the church had retained and stationed uniformed policemen at the entrance and in the building's vestibule.

Everyone was a bit surprised and pleased (at least most were) that for over an hour, no phones rang, no cameras clicked, and no other sign of technological trespass occurred. A sense of solemnity prevailed throughout the service.

While people entered the building, the organist played a soft, seamless medley of hymns. A reverent hush was observed by the congregation, even among the writers and reporters in the back of the room.

The radiance of the evening sun through stained glass dappled the sanctuary. The slow movement of color would have been undetectable from minute to minute, but over the course of the hour, patches of red, lavender, melon, gold, and emerald shifted kaleidoscopically across the room.

The sun was a brush; the west window its palette; the floor, walls, ceiling, and congregants its canvas; an angel somewhere, the artist.

The tulip gardens of Holland would have blushed in the presence of such sublime color and light. The effect of filtered rays, muted tints,

and deepening shadows was perfectly suited to the occasion commemorating an old artist.

Lamisha, the youngest member of the congregation and weepy with feelings too complex for her vocabulary, was aware enough of her surroundings to notice the swaths of color as they crept subtly across the sanctuary.

She wondered if the colors from the windows, set free like the notes of music from Simone's cello, would hide in the chandeliers and curtains and rafters until late at night when the room was dark and silent. Did they, too, like those quarter and eighth and sixteenth notes at the Bet, reappear for festivities after midnight? Is that what the preacher meant when he spoke of resurrection?

If Theo were there, he would have been able to tell her.

A large bouquet of hydrangeas and roses had been placed in front of the pulpit where a casket might ordinarily have been situated. Next to the flowers, a portrait of Theo, drawn by Asher and placed on a paint-stained easel, fixed its gaze on the congregation. In it, Theo's closed mouth smiled broadly, and his eyes glistened. To those in the front rows, Asher's mastery as an artist and Theo's mastery as a man fully-alive were movingly apparent.

At precisely seven o'clock, the last notes of the organ receded into silence, and Father Lundy walked to the pulpit. He paused, studied the assembled mourners, and finally settled his eyes on those nearest him. In a tone almost conversational — strong and precise and warm — he spoke.

"To everyone else, he was Zila the famous. To us, he was Theo the familiar.

"To everyone else, he was Zila the wealthy. To us, he was Theo the generous.

"To some, he is Zila the headline. To us, he is Theo the friend.

"To some, he is Zila the preyed upon. To us, he is Theo the prayed for.

"To some, he was Zila the mysterious recluse. To us," Father Lundy looked at the first rows, at Ellen, Kendrick, and at Tony's tear-filled eyes, "to us, he will always be the face of heaven.

"We honor him today. And we grieve, but not — to quote the Apostle Paul — as those who have no hope. Didn't Theo speak often of heaven,

with an unmistakable longing in his voice and with a clear conviction of its reality and beauty?"

Heads nodded.

"In Theo's honor, and in keeping with the hope that expressed itself so radiantly in his life, I read these words of promise from Another, a far greater One who lived obscurely among *His* neighbors long ago, an Artist Himself, the One who, for Theo, defined life and love and goodness. The One who alone makes *us* good and wise and happy."

Father Lundy read from the gospels of Matthew and John and then, in recognition of Theo's love for water, both moving *and* still, the twenty-third Psalm.

Father Lundy let the words hang over the room before offering an extemporaneous prayer: thankful, thoughtful, honest, and eloquent.

". . . And if it is true that 'begging is our only wisdom,' then we beg, dear Lord, that this man's presence in our lives will not have been in vain but instead that we will perpetuate the obedient faith, the cheerful hope, and the generous love that he made so beautifully visible while he was here among us. Might the light of his countenance, how he loved, and who he loved, inspire us to follow him, even as he followed the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen."

When those in the congregation opened their eyes and raised their heads, Professor Gobelli was sitting before them, to the right of the pulpit.

With graceful and balletic precision of movement, he raised his left hand to the neck of the cello, positioned the bow over the strings with his right, took a deep breath, relaxed his shoulders, tilted his head slightly, and began to play a mournful rendition of "Fado for Theo."

Simone, face still bruised and hand still bandaged, listened intently to the tribute he had written for his erstwhile benefactor. He could never have imagined, when he wrote the piece, that it would become a requiem. If he had been able to play the piece himself — would that day *ever* come? — he would have done so. For now, the strange providence of his injury allowed him, instead, to weep at the beauty of what he had written and to hear his mentor bring the notes to life.

Professor Gobelli played the piece slowly, with a pathos that only a master could coax from wood and strings. The cello groaned, sighed,

sobbed, prayed, pleaded, and finally rested.

Theo would have been pleased.

When the last note of the fado faded into silence, Professor Gobelli lifted the bow from the strings, laid his head on the cello's neck, and sat motionless for a spell of seconds, as if paralyzed by the power of the moment. He wiped his eyes, stood, and left the platform as Father Lundy returned to the pulpit.

"Some of you," Father Lundy nodded to the front rows, "are much more qualified than I to offer a eulogy for Theo. At your request, I am honored to speak on your behalf and to share some thoughts on the life we celebrate here this evening. I do hope, in days to come, in whatever time and way seem appropriate to you, you will share your own stories about this wonderful man, this mysterious stranger who so quickly and deeply won our hearts.

"We have just recently passed through the Easter season in which themes of darkness and light, death and resurrection, despair and hope, fear and faith, and grief and joy have all been set before us.

"As I have reflected on Theo's life these past few days, one scene from the record of Christ's life has come to my mind over and over.

"You probably recall the scene. It occurs on a path called the Road to Emmaus. Jesus had been executed and news of His death had been widely circulated. It is a story of great religious significance in a city of great religious importance. And all the people seemed to have been talking about it.

"Two people were walking the Road to Emmaus together. We are given few details about them in the text, but one can imagine them robed and sandaled, leaning forward with their hands clasped behind their backs, faces furrowed with concern and questions, the sorts of concerns and questions that we have whenever death comes our way, the sorts of questions we have today, this very hour, two thousand years later.

"Those two — one was a man named Cleopas — were soon joined by a third.

"'Mind if I join you?' he asked.

"We don't know if He was welcome. Maybe the couple would rather have been left to themselves, to untie the Gordian knot of the

crucifixion without the distraction of a stranger. But they tolerated Him even if they didn't actually welcome Him.

"And this third, a talkative chap it seems, asked them what they were discussing so intently.

"'Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Don't you watch the news?'"

"And so, they told Him, this poor uninformed fellow. You can almost feel their impatience, their astonishment at His ignorance. Maybe He asked for details, for clarification. Maybe He expressed incredulity and amazement.

"'You don't say! Really?'

"Maybe *His* brow was furrowed too. Maybe not. Maybe He smiled, squinted His eyes, and looked up. We don't know. But what we do know is that He took over the conversation, just hijacked it right out from under them. And He told them a long story, one they thought they knew already, one they thought they had already figured out and clearly understood.

"He told them the story that many of us think we know, one that we think we've all figured out. The wonderful story that, for many of us, has lost any element of wonder. The text tells us that Jesus 'opened the scriptures' and brought to life all those words about the everlasting God, about a world made good and beautiful but now horribly ruined, about a rescue that none could possibly have imagined. He told them *that* story in a way that reawakened wonder in those two fellow travelers.

"From all indications, to their credit, they listened attentively and without interruption. They were so captivated that, when they finally reached their destination and should have been saying farewell, they asked Him to stay with them longer, which He did. And at some point, those two pilgrims realized that their mysterious walking partner was no ordinary man. He could tell them the story because He wrote the story.

"Because *He* was the story.

"We are told that 'their eyes were opened.'

"And this is what the pair subsequently recalled when they spoke of their seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

"'Our hearts burned within us.' Their hearts *burned* within them."

Father Lundy allowed the phrase to linger in silence for a few seconds before he resumed.

“We all walk roads of various descriptions in life. The long and winding road. The road to ruin. Easy Street. The road less traveled.

“Along the way, there are questions, there is news, there are concerns and fears and uncertainties that furrow our brows, trouble our souls, and break our hearts. Death terrifies many of us.

“But God, in His sublime goodness, has always sent others, mysterious others, to walk with us — prophets, preachers, friends, teachers, artists, storytellers, wives and husbands, children, songbirds and rivers, even hardship and loss — to help us see clearly. They are ones who make our hearts burn within us, who call us out of our indifference, our lethargy, our death and defeat. They call us to be fully alive, or at least more alive than we were before we met them.

“And so . . . Theo.

“For a year, he was in our midst and now, looking back, can’t we say that, when we were with him, our hearts burned within us, our souls stood on tiptoe, our eyes recognized something good and true, and our minds could believe, if not fully, then ever so slightly, that love and heaven and forgiveness are the most real things that we can know in this world?

“I think we are only beginning to understand and appreciate what a unique man Theo was. Can you call to mind anyone who quite so beautifully integrated the concrete and the spiritual? Who lived with such a winsome commitment to the seen and the unseen, the ultimate and the proximate, the wide grace and the narrow way?

“Theo was a playful man in the best sense of that word. But it seems more and more certain to me that his lightheartedness was deadly serious and steeped in purpose. It was one more way in which he spoke to us the language of another place. His every kindness was a signpost, meant no doubt for the present but pointing to the up ahead, aiming at the still to come.

“Like you, I wonder why Theo chose our city. But we can trust that, had he wanted us to know, he would have told us. By all accounts, he wanted refuge. From what or whom? For how long or why, we don’t know. We might never know. But how fortunate we are that he chose

us, that out of the whole world available to him — and apparently the whole world *was* — he settled among us, moved into our neighborhood, adopted us as his children, and made us the objects of his affection and the beneficiaries of his thoughtfulness.

"Theo could have come to us with great fanfare. He could have flaunted his importance and impressed us with his great wealth and long list of accomplishments. Instead, he came with anonymous handwritten letters and no last name. Instead, he came, as did His Lord, not to be served but to serve.

"And if you wonder why, if you are mystified that he was so ruthlessly good, let me tell you and you and you . . ."

Father Lundy looked at the front section, taking time to linger on the face of each one in Theo's inner circle.

"He . . . loved . . . you.

"And so, I say to you, my friends and neighbors, followers of Christ and those not, if you would honor the memory of Gamez Theophilus Zilavez, then do good, bestow kindness, strive for beauty, seek and find the river that leads to life everlasting, and draw from the fountain that never runs dry.

"Like Theo did.

"For heaven's sake.

"Amen."

CHAPTER 61

Weariness — from personal grief, from unwelcome attention, from concern for others, from work, and from age — was etched across the face of James Ponder in the days following Theo's death.

When members of the media learned he had been consultant, landlord, confidant, and friend of the renowned Zila, they beat a hasty path to the door of Ponder House in hopes of an interview. They seemed most interested in answering a single question: Why had the great artist taken up residence in Golden?

The front door of Ponder House, the same door at which Theo had stood a year or so earlier, became a well-visited site of dejection as Mrs. Gidley, in full sergeant-at-arms mode, denied entry, one by one, to the steady flow of inquirers.

Consequently, it was all the more surprising when Mrs. Gidley stood in Mr. Ponder's doorway one morning to announce that someone wished to meet with him. She tapped lightly before speaking.

"There's a young woman from out of town who'd like to see you.

She's not with any press or media group."

Mr. Ponder was preoccupied with a sheaf of documents on his desk. "Anita, you know I don't have time or energy for anything new, especially today. Our meeting with Theo's staff tomorrow is taking every minute I have right now. Tell her to come back in a month."

"She told me she wouldn't leave until you see her."

"Did she really?" His irritation was obvious. "Then call the police and have her removed."

Mrs. Gidley remained calmly in the doorway. "Mr. Ponder, I think you ought to meet with her."

He looked up. The old Mrs. Gidley, the before-Theo Mrs. Gidley, would have relished the chance to have someone thrown out of the office.

"Why do you think I ought to meet with her?"

Mrs. Gidley shook her head. "I'm not really sure. I just have a feeling

you should."

Mr. Ponder sighed. "Send her up."

The young woman was well-dressed, soft-spoken, and nervous. The first impression she made did not seem consistent with someone who would force herself, unwanted and uninvited, into a busy office. Quite the contrary.

She walked across the room to Mr. Ponder's desk. He did not acknowledge her presence or stand until she was directly in front of him. He made no attempt to make her feel welcome. No handshake. No pleasantries. No offer of coffee. He stayed behind his desk as she took a seat and introduced herself.

"Mr. Ponder, my name is Olivia Reese. Your secretary told me you're not taking any new clients, so thank you for seeing me."

"That's correct, Ms. Reese. I am very busy, so just tell me why you're here."

She pulled an item from her purse. "Yes, sir. Well, I need you to help me locate someone, like a missing person. I think she lives in this area."

"Ms. Reese, what you need is a private investigator. I am not one of those, but I can recommend some good ones to you. Mrs. Gidley can give you their names. Why don't you go back downstairs, and I'll call her to tell her what you need."

The woman remained in her chair. "Thank you, but I'd like you to do it. I think you'd be best."

The unflappable Mr. Ponder snapped. "Young lady, I'm tired. I've got all I can handle right now. Please leave. Now."

The woman's face went pale, and her eyes watered. Mr. Ponder winced at his own bluntness and made a mild apology but reasserted his unavailability.

Olivia, clearly rattled by the tone of the conversation, did not move. "Mr. Ponder, I'm not here to bother you, and I can tell you're tired. Your secretary told me you're working on a really important case, and I'm sorry to barge in like this, but what I've got is really important to me, and I need to hire someone to help me. I think you're that person." She held out an envelope to him. "Would you read this please?"

She reached across the desk to hand Mr. Ponder the envelope. It was addressed to her home in South Carolina.

He opened the letter, put it on the papers in front of him, placed both elbows on the desk, and cradled his forehead on steepled fingers.

He read the letter slowly. Then again.

For a moment he sat motionless, eyes on the page in front of him. As he lifted his head, gone was the earlier flush of anger and impatience.

He looked tenderly into the young woman's face.

Willa.

CHAPTER 62

Some days later, Asher received a call from Mr. Ponder, a call that, he supposed at first, was one of condolence. A number of others had already called to check on him and to extend sympathies. But when Mr. Ponder asked that Asher come to his office about “some matters concerning Theo,” he was understandably curious.

“If you’d like, I can come right now, Mr. Ponder. I’m having a hard time getting any work done today anyway.”

Mrs. Gidley was waiting when Asher arrived. She led him upstairs.

On any other occasion, Asher would have been interested in the trappings of the office, as Theo had been when he was there for the first time, but not now.

Asher wanted to hear what Mr. Ponder had to say, and perhaps to unburden his own heart a bit.

The two men exchanged greetings.

“Please Asher, have a seat.” Mr. Ponder nodded to the table. “This is exactly where Theo and I sat when we first met a year ago.” He recounted that meeting in detail.

“Asher, for the past year, I’ve known exactly who he was. I have been his confidant and advisor . . . and friend.” He hesitated. “Theo and I spoke every week, usually several times. Your portraits, as you might imagine, have kept me and Mrs. Gidley quite busy this past year, but we’ve enjoyed being part of the endeavor. Theo was a great fan of you and your work. Very much so. More, I’m sure, than you know.

“When Theo returned to Golden after Christmas, he gave me some items to hold in trust for you. He had met with his lawyers while he was in New York and had made some important decisions that involve you and some of the properties he used to mention. We can discuss all of that later, but for now he instructed me to deliver these papers to you after his death. I don’t think he expected it would be so soon — none of us did, of course — but at eighty-seven, he was thinking ahead.”

Asher remained silent.

Mr. Ponder rose and stepped to his desk. He picked up a large envelope and a small box, returned to the table, and placed the items in front of Asher, then sat.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Mr. Ponder asked.

“Sure.” Asher looked at the envelope and the box, hesitant to touch them.

“Here’s the key to Theo’s apartment.” Mr. Ponder pushed the small object across the table. “Why don’t you go there to open these? You’ll probably want a quiet place. No one will bother you. And stay as long as you’d like. You can return the key tomorrow.”

It was late afternoon when Asher climbed the stairs to the apartment. On the walk there, he called Brooke to tell her about his meeting with Mr. Ponder and to let her know he might be late coming home.

Before entering the apartment, he turned, as Theo had often done, to look at the river. The tender greens of oak and ash bud, the reds of maple, the occasional whites of dogwood, and the golds of forsythia on the far side of the Oxbow would have pleased the old man.

Springtime. An end with a future.

Asher noticed a small bit of light blue eggshell at his feet. It seemed an absurd thing to do at the moment, but he picked it up, placed it like a small hat on the little finger of his right hand, took the jeweler’s loupe from his pocket, and studied the shell’s speckled surface.

Doing so was an acknowledgment, a tribute, to Theo’s gift of sight. A

eulogy. It was a gesture to invoke Theo's presence, maybe even a prayer that, in the next minutes or hours, Asher would be able to see clearly whatever it was he was supposed to see.

He opened the door, stepped inside, and let the uneasy silence have its way with him for a few seconds before walking to the front room. Theo's absence was a weight on Asher's chest.

The lamp beside the reading chair was on. A vase of freshly cut flowers, light blue hydrangea, and a glass of water — the thoughtful gestures of Mrs. Gidley — were on the small table beside the chair. Three books were also there, presumably ones that Theo was in the process of reading when he died. There were bookmarks in each of them.

What were the last words his old eyes read? Asher wondered.

Most prominently, an easel had been set up a short reach in front of the chair, at a spot where slanted rays of sun entered the room through the skylight at that hour of the day.

A blue cloth draped the easel. Asher lifted it gently.

For the next few minutes, he let the painting have way with his thoughts. It was a . . .

Work of art.

Witness to friendship.

Window to a soul.

He had wondered sometimes how it might feel to be the recipient of a portrait. The beneficiary of a bestowal.

Now he knew.

Theo had painted his — Asher's — face.

The portrait captured a hint of a grin.

A tone of thoughtfulness.

Asher took a sip of water and then opened the envelope. It contained three letters. They were all unfolded, in a small stack.

He glanced at each of them before reading.

The first, a lengthy one, was written in Theo's unmistakable hand.

The second was in a slightly less recognizable script. The stationery was old, a bit yellowed but uncreased and well preserved.

The third was the work of a child.

Asher read them in that order, from top to bottom.

Dear Asher,

If you are reading this, it means — to use Grandmother Whitaker's lovely phrase — that I have "crossed over." The heaven that has been my fervent hope is now my evermore reality. My absence, however, means that I will not be here to answer any questions you might have after reading this letter.

I considered going to my grave without telling any of what I am about to share with you. But after much thought and prayer, I'm writing from a sense that, if I were you, I would want to know.

Many years ago, I received a letter from a little boy. The young fellow was hoping to be an artist someday and wanted my advice on how to reach that goal, since I was already an artist myself. I don't know that my advice helped him at all, but I do know that he has fulfilled his dream most admirably. Through long years of hard work and a laudable commitment to excellence, he has bequeathed a legacy of beauty to the murky entity known as "the art world" and, more notably, has brought gladness to the many subjects and recipients of his work in the real world.

When I wrote a short reply to the little boy, I did so with the wish of meeting him someday, a wish that has been more than fulfilled in recent months. That little boy, named Asher, is the reason I came to Golden. You can hardly know the joy it has brought me — man to man, artist to artist, soul to soul — to finally see his face, his world, and his goodness during this past year.

I hope you will receive this portrait as a token of a colleague's respect and admiration. I have worked on it with an awareness that, only a short distance away, you too would be in your studio — pencils, pens, and brushes in hand — pursuing the same noble end at which I have aimed . . . art lovingly done.

It is for others to judge which of us surpasses the other in our efforts. For me, there is no doubt about who is the master and who is the student.

The purchase and bestowals of your work in recent months have been some of the greatest pleasures of my life and, without a doubt, the most fulfilling. I daresay it has been the high point of my professional

accomplishment. And so, beyond mere praise for your skill as an artist, I owe and gladly give to you my everlasting thanks for the "conspiracies of kindness" that have united us since my arrival in Golden.

This old man will someday leave the world knowing that, at least for one short season, he was an agent for good and that he used art not for his personal fame or advancement but for its highest ends — "to bestow . . . a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

Ellen, Kendrick, Katherine, and all the others will never again be quite what they were before they held the jewel of your portraiture in their hands for the first time. I pray that this portrait might be, for you, the same sort of blessing that yours have been to them.

Asher paused, looked up, and took notice of late-afternoon sunbeams entering the room through the high windows. His eyes moved aimlessly from one object or surface to another. They settled once again on the shimmering surface of the portrait. He looked at himself on the canvas.

At the eyes.

Their shape.

Their placement relative to nose and cheekbone. Their color.

How very much like Theo's.

He had never noticed the subtle similarity before.

After several minutes, he took up the letter and resumed reading.

So much about you reminds me of another, of a girl I met many years ago when I was a young man in Spain. The movement of your hands when you sketch, the intensity of your eyes, and the tilt of your head when you paint all take my thoughts to that girl. Might I tell you about her?

We had both traveled to Madrid for classes at the Prado. I was the instructor, an "artist in residence." She was a student.

Young, free spirits that we were, and reckless in ways, we studied and traveled together, drew and painted, and read about and shared lofty aspirations and ideals about art. Me, the common boy from the Douro, she the debutante from Golden. We fell glowingly in love with one

another, an odd and wonderful pair. A handsome pair, too, if I say so myself.

I was drawn to her not just by her beauty, which was undeniable, but by a temperament, a spirit, a je ne sais quoi that expressed itself in tenderness toward the world around her. I recognized her, at once, as my superior.

I was farther along as an artist.

She was much farther along as a work of art.

Before she and I met, I had begun to be acclaimed among the critics, taken seriously, and publicized and honored as an up-and-coming artist. It happened quickly and unexpectedly, long before I was ready to handle so much attention. I will not trouble you with the story of my regrettable ascendancy other than to say that I was never more cursed than when I bowed down to the enslaving idol of fame.

The higher I rose in prominence — so quickly, so visibly — the farther the girl fell behind. I know now she had no desire to follow me, no interest in the "supremely interesting man" — one critic's description — that I had become.

We were both committed to pursue ideals of beauty and truth in our vocation.

Or so we both said.

Her commitment was sincere, real, and unshakable. Mine, at the first whisper of fame and celebrity, quivered and fell. Being the self-obsessed young man that I was, I would have been very pleased if every spotlight in the universe had been fixed on me. My arrogance, though disguised, must have been an ugly, hideous presence to one of her sensitive, selfless heart.

The girl from Golden continued to draw and paint, working harder and harder to improve her skills, and more and more happily it seemed, even without the notice of others. There was love in her art, in the motive, in the pursuit, and in the final result. It was a love that allowed her to be content with the little, the nameless, the unremembered.

At some point, her refusal to be impressed by my greatness became a sore spot, but only in me. I grew resentful. She grew weary. She never ceased to love me — she adored me — but I wanted more; I wanted her to worship me. She would never have dreamt of such a thing. Doing so,

I now realize, would have required her not to love me. She was too substantial for such a blasphemy. She was anchored to something immovable. I was adrift on fickle waves of ambition.

And then, out of the blue, without warning, she was gone.

The last time we were together, we shared a night at our favorite place beside the sea. She sat quietly as I went on and on about my great success, my great plans, my rising star. How I must have grieved her. We had a meal for the gods and music and romance. We slept that night to the sound of the Mediterranean. When she cried at the beauty of it, I was not alarmed. Her eyes were often tearful at such moments.

I know now, though, she was telling me goodbye.

A week later, without a word, she left. It was the last time I ever saw her, though her face has been in my mind ever since.

When I learned that she had returned to her home in Golden, I wrote, desperate to hear from her. I was certain she would return to me. And why wouldn't she? Who would not want to walk in the shadow of the meteoric Zila?

This was long before all the ways that we communicate now. I was hostage somewhat to the slow movement of handwritten letters across the ocean. I wrote to her and then waited and waited for a reply.

Her silence was maddening.

When my patience was exhausted, I began making plans to visit her — unannounced — in Golden.

My agent, in an effort to be protective of my interests, hired a consultant in Golden, a Mr. Ponder, to learn more about the girl and her family before I traveled there.

He reported to me that, not long after returning home from Madrid, she had eloped with an old boyfriend. And also that she was the mother of a little boy.

I was stunned, crushed, angry. How could it be? I had so many questions. What should I do?

At the urging of my agent, who saw my very career in jeopardy, I canceled my trip, threw myself into my work, and tried to put her out of my mind.

I never could.

I never have.

To this day, I don't believe I ever finished a painting or drawing without hoping she would see it.

Hers, above all others, was the only applause I ever really wanted.

And she (along with my dear Tita), she alone has remained the love of my life.

When I first saw Minnette's portrait at the Chalice, and then met her in person at the very first bestowal, I saw again the eyes of the girl from Golden.

Minette's grandmother. Gammy.

Your mother.

For several years, I wondered about the little boy. Could he possibly be my son? Would she not want me to know?

But again, there was plenty in my life and work to distract my mind from those questions. And two facts kept me in my place: She was married, and I was famous.

Still, a thousand times I considered reaching out to her.

Imagine my complete surprise when, years later, I received a letter from her little boy.

Actually, there were two letters, one from him and one from her. My head spun when I recognized who they were from, and my hopes leapt at the prospect of being reunited with her somehow. Maybe something had happened in her marriage? A death? A divorce?

But there was no such news.

In fact, she told me she was "a happy mother, a cared-for wife, and a blessed woman." There were few details. She stated that she had married "a very good and gracious man" within weeks of returning home from Madrid.

Most of all, I think she wanted me to know about you.

Her letter is enclosed.

As you will see when you read it, your mother implored me, in the strongest possible words (but not unkindly), never to write or pursue her.

I honored her request until the day of her death, though I have doubted, even grieved over, that decision many times.

I never replied to her letter.

I did, of course, reply to yours.

I have often wondered, why did she write to me at all? What did she expect of me?

I will never know the answer to those questions, but I am forever grateful that her letter, the very few words she sent me, brought me as an old man to Golden to spend part of my final years with you.

Asher took a deep breath as he processed the truth of what he was reading.

Theo. His father?

He gazed at the portrait of himself and then lifted his eyes to the glass doors overlooking Broadway. Through them, he could see the oaks of the Promenade and sense the long shadows of the dying day.

He resumed reading.

Asher, when I first visited your studio, we talked about one of the paintings in your entrance hallway, the one you once described to me as your mother's favorite, the framed landscape of the tree on the hillside with the person standing at the easel.

You told me that you have always wondered about that painting. I will tell you the story.

It depicts a field near a cottage in Biscopo, a small town on the coast of Spain.

Shortly after your mother and I met at the Prado, another artist-in-residence, a Spaniard, took us to Biscopo, us and a dozen others, to study seascape and sky. He was from the old school of realism. He assured us we would never see a place like it. "It will crush you as artists. It will tempt you to burn your brushes, slice your canvasses, and declare yourself defeated. It will show you how paltry your art is, how meager your talent. It will be the pinnacle to which you will aspire for the rest of your creative lives."

He was a bit melodramatic, perhaps, but his description of the place was not overstated in the least.

It was there and then, in Biscopo, that your mother and I first talked at length, painted together, and fell in love. Months later, one holiday, she and I returned, rented a small cottage on the cliffs, and painted in the open air during the daylight hours. At night we would walk to the

field with the tree, spread out our red blanket, and sleep beneath the stars.

We returned there a number of times.

It was our Elysian Field. I did a painting of it — "Me, Painting You, Painting," the one in your studio — and gave it to her as a birthday gift.

I also gave her an opal necklace on a gold chain, a necklace my mother and grandmother had worn. The heart-shaped opal, we agreed, was the Mediterranean night in miniature — ocean, sky, stars, moonlight, seashore. We called that piece of jewelry the "Evening of Biscopo." It was my pledge to marry her someday.

And yes, as I painted her standing in that field, she painted me, facing her, the vast ocean and open sky at my back.

I close.

As strange as it might sound, Asher, especially at this, my happiest season of life, I long for heaven. It might still be many years away, but I think of it often as the low sun and long shadows lengthen over my days. Some laugh, of course, at the notion — many of my artistic peers, and yours, find my hope positively naive and fanciful — but beauty, throughout my life, has always seemed to hint at something more. I long, as one has said, not just to see it but to verily become part of it. Enough of this standing on the outside looking in. Soon, if the Grand Artist has spoken truthfully, soon enough, the door will open for me.

Funny how this old hand, once so strong and capable and steady, begins to tremor in these dwindling years. It has covered ten thousand canvasses that stretch around the world. It has served me well. But never has its work been more impossible, and more important, than in writing these words of my affection for you.

I am forever thankful for these days, when a chalice light and broad filled my soul with a peace and joy I never dreamt possible.

I am a grateful old man.

A proud father.

Press on, dear boy.

Seek truth.

Make beauty.

Live well.
I love you, my son.

Till heaven,
Theo

Asher slumped, lowered the letter to his lap, rested his head on the back of the chair, and closed his eyes. He sat in the early evening dark as a convergence of grief, regret, confusion, and love ran through him. He had no idea how long he had been there when he finally picked up the second letter. He wiped his eyes to read.

Three pages of cream-colored stationery, thin with age and slightly faded, bore the small, precise handwriting of Asher's mother.

My dear Zila,

I am hesitant to send this letter, fearful that it might prompt a reply, but I do so with confidence that you will favor its receipt with the tenderness that drew me to you when we first met.

I know that my departure was sudden, perhaps unkindly so, but I saw no other way to leave than to disappear as I did. I have often wondered if I did the right thing, and I will never know how I mustered the strength to board the flight from Madrid to Golden.

I arrived home confused, heartbroken, afraid, and desperate.

I felt that I had no choice but to marry as quickly as I could. He was — is — a dear friend, a very good and gracious man who had loved me since childhood. He was the closest thing I had to a boyfriend in high school, and he often teased me that he would marry me someday. We eloped shortly after I returned home.

I am still amazed that he took me in as he did, that he was willing to help hide my secret and even be the scapegoat for my scandal.

He married me knowing everything. Knowing that I was pregnant.

And that the little boy was yours.

The child is now six years old and gives every indication that he will be an artist. He brings such joy and is just beginning to write words.

For all these years, I have wanted you to know of him but did not know how or why I should tell you. I also feared what might happen if

we communicated with each other. I still do. From all I read about you in the newspapers and magazines, you are making a lasting mark in the art world. And I have the simple joys of being a happy mother, a cared-for wife, and a blessed woman. It would be reckless beyond words, and pointless, to put either of our good fortunes in jeopardy, much less the hearts of the ones we love. And so I ask, indeed beg, that you not write or call.

Please, Zila, never. And forgive me that I have taken a liberty that I deny to you. As heartless as my request might seem, and as hard as it is to make, I trust you see the wisdom in it, especially after all these years.

I hope it will not trouble you to know that, even now, you are thought of often and fondly.

Be assured I will not trouble you again.

But also be assured that I will love the boy with the affection of two hearts.

I enclose, too, the Evening of Biscopo. I have not worn it since coming home but have sometimes looked at it, held it up to the light, traveled in my imagination where it took me. Please assume no bitterness on my part in its return. Your dear grandmother and mother would be heartsick to know that such beauty is being deprived the light of day in a far-away jewelry box. Surely there is, or will be, someone in your life who will wear it fittingly someday.

Every blessing in your well-deserved success. With it, I pray comes much happiness and peace.

Another piece of the cream-colored paper, bearing the large, irregular lettering of a child's hand, followed.

Dear Mr. Zila,

I am six.
You draw nice.
I like to draw.
When I grow up, I want to draw.

From,
Asher

The reply to that little boy's letter, Asher knew, was in a frame in the hallway on the wall of his studio, signed simply, "Zila."

Asher would read the letters again when his head was clearer. But not that night. He knew enough for the moment. And true to Theo's prediction, he had a host of questions that would never be answered.

Asher rose from the chair, stepped out onto the balcony, drew a deep breath, and stood with a weary gaze over the Promenade.

There was, and would be, much to think about.

Much to cherish.

Much to lament.

A whisper, something about good sadness and great love, passed through Asher's mind.

He walked back indoors, gazed at the portrait, gathered up the letters, and was putting them in the envelope when he remembered the small box.

He sat down and opened it.

A necklace, just as Theo had described it, opal on a gold chain, in the shape of a heart, was in the box with a simple note.

It was my pledge.

Before turning off the lamp, Asher leaned forward, elbows on knees, toward the portrait of himself, as if nearness to it would somehow place him close to Theo again. Every brush stroke and line, after all, had been the work of the old man's fingers, some perhaps very recently.

Only then did Asher realize that a second canvas had been placed beneath his portrait.

He carefully removed "himself" from the easel and placed it on the floor.

The second canvas was eighteen inches square. It was an oceanside scene. The bulk of the painting was sky and sea in various shades of blue and aquamarine with wisps of cloud and a seagull.

In the foreground, occupying the bottom third of the canvas, was a field in lush green and ochre. It appeared to end at a cliff that overlooked the sea.

No beach was visible.

In the field stood an easel.

At the easel stood a painter, largely obscured from view. Legs and portions of one arm were visible but no face or torso.

Asher, to confirm a hunch, looked at the back of the canvas. It said:

Me painting you painting me. I love you.

He turned off the light and walked home.

EPILOGUE

The assailants were never identified or prosecuted.

Pearce Glissen is still a very important man. He is also incredulous and irritated that his older brother, who "could be a legitimate businessman now that he has inherited an art empire," still prefers to spend his days drawing pictures of people's faces.

It is feared that, any day now, a cell phone will graft itself into Pearce's hand and become a permanent attachment to his body.

Shep and Addie have a seasoned team of baristas who carry out most of the day-to-day operations at the Chalice. The couple still shows up most days to check on the shop and visit with friends. Business has never been better, and there is talk of a second location, complete with a portrait gallery, in another nearby college town.

Theo's portrait was hung at the Chalice shortly after his death, Tony's portrait on one side and Ellen's on the other.

Lamisha has outgrown but still owns the pair of shoes blue as morpho. She walks with a limp but does not require crutches any longer. When she graduates from high school, she wants to be a physical therapist or an artist. Either way, her education is paid for as long as she maintains a B average or better.

She and Maria Mendez, the daughter of the little man from Guatemala, text each other and talk on the phone frequently.

Basil occasionally plays music on the sidewalk but spends most of his time working on a doctorate in American Literature. He hopes to teach at Golden University and presently serves there as an adjunct professor while he pursues his studies.

He and Trina married. They moved into a small house in the Boughery, near the Glissens.

Simone's hand — some say it was a miracle — healed quickly and completely. As soon as he was able to do so, he resumed his rigorous practice schedule, using a borrowed cello. In time he was hired by a reputable symphony in Massachusetts and moved north. As a going-away gift, friends along the Promenade collected contributions —

”Simone’s Cello Fund” — and, with Professor Gobelli’s assistance, bought him a vintage instrument of his own. He cried at the bestowal.

Kendrick still works in the university’s custodial department. He has been promoted to a supervisory position with a good salary and full benefits and works the day shift. His portrait hangs on the wall beside Lamisha’s bed. Grandmother Whitaker is alive but frail. She still cooks and keeps house for Kendrick and Lamisha. He regularly drives her to church on Sunday.

For more than three years, Minnette has been on indefinite leave from her job with the accounting firm. She works for them from home as an independent contractor, setting her own hours.

She and Derrick have a son named Theo.

He is an exquisitely handsome little boy.

Katherine Lesker continues to write for the local newspaper but has also found time to collect stories from people who met Theo and received their portraits at the Fedder. She published those accounts, with a collection of essays, in a book called Little, Nameless, Unremembered. It was subtitled *The Bestowals of Theo*. It opened with Katherine's statement, "His decision to live small made him larger than life."

Mr. Ponder and Mrs. Gidley still report to Ponder House each day. Their business hours are irregular, and half days are common. They have taken only one new client since Theo's death: Ellen.

Ellen still rides the Noble Invention. For months following the attack, she avoided the Fedder, day and night. According to others who lived under the bridge and saw her there regularly, she suffered nightmares and hallucinations that made them fear for her safety. Mrs. Ocie Van Blarcum convinced Ellen: 1) to see a doctor (the consultation took place in the full light of day at the Riverwalk near the kingfisher's nest), 2) to become a resident at the Mission (in a private room), and 3) to pursue her featherwood venture.

Within a year she was a regular presence on the Promenade again. Her business is thriving. She works in a space at the rear of Jason's bike shop. A piece of featherwood is proudly displayed on Mr. Ponder's immaculate desk.

In the early days of her enterprise, she amassed a savings of $1,600. Despite Mr. Ponder's advice that she retain some of the money to pay future expenses of her business, she insisted on contributing all of it to Simone's Cello Fund.

Willa is thirty-five this year.

Samantha, daughter of Asher and Brooke, who did indeed end up getting engaged on that Thanksgiving night, had a beautiful wedding in the backyard of Glissen House. Cousin Minnette was her maid of honor.

Sam wore a simple linen dress and no shoes. When she exchanged vows with Cody, the autumn sun glimmered with Mediterranean splendor on her necklace, a heart-shaped opal on a gold chain.

After the ceremony she insisted that her father keep the Evening of Biscopo.

Asher still paints in the big house, in the serene light of Golden. His responsibilities as heir and beneficiary of Theo's estate have occupied much of his time and many of his thoughts since Theo's death. But he is grateful, and most of his working hours continue to be spent in the blesséd company of faces, in the noble pursuit of beauty, and in the humble service of art lovingly done.

At the conclusion of each day when he leaves the studio, he walks past two paintings and lightly touches a shadow box that hangs between them, a heart-shaped reminder of the undead, of the undying, and of an end with a future.

On occasional Sundays, Tony sits in the back row of St. James beside Ellen and the Noble Invention. He is slightly quieter now than he was when Theo was alive, and his edges are a bit softer.

He drinks one small glass of port, only one, at the end of each day.

A toast.

And for the fifteenth year in a row, the Verbivore is a week away from closing its doors.

On the first anniversary of Theo's death, Tony had a plaque embedded in Theo's bench at the Fedder. All who read it are told that this was a place where heaven and earth met in the form of an old Portuguese man. They are told that all, who choose to be, are capable of saintliness. They are also told that faith, hope, and love endure, but the greatest of these is love.

ABOUT
THE AUTHOR

Allen Levi — attorney, judge, singer/songwriter, author — lives on and cares for family acreage near a small town in middle Georgia. Theo of Golden is his first novel